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The Cardinal's Rakehellies Strike for France

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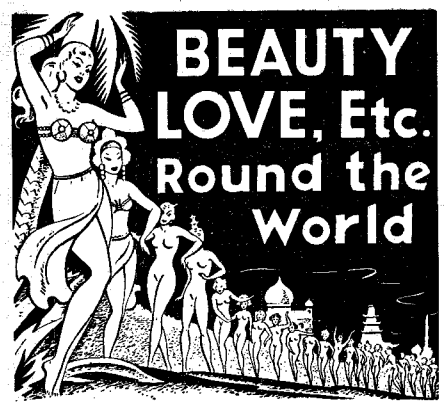

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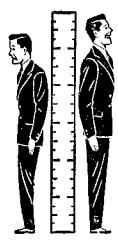

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28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
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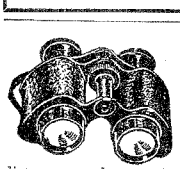

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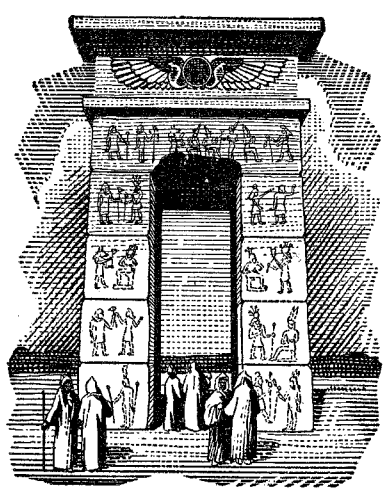

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Volume 309 | CONTENTS FOR JULY 26, 1941 | Number 4

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RICHARD SALE

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FIVE ACES WEST—*Short Novel* . . . . . **Cliff Farrell** **6**

On they go, these tattered, hard-bitten pioneers—through misery and Indian peril; and they're led by a dude gambler who will sacrifice anything but luck and Christian charity

SWORDS IN EXILE—*First of six parts* . . **Murray R. Montgomery** **24**

In all of Louis' France there are but two men who can save the kingdom—those rakehellies, Cleve and d'Entreville. And Richelieu has betrayed them into treason!

BRASSGUTS—*Short Story* . . . . . **Luke Short** **33**

The dogs are starving, the cold is enough to shrivel your soul; and out on the frozen trail is a moose that's better than a dozen two-legged critturs

NORTHWARD RAILS—*Third of six parts* . . . . . **Frank Bunce** **39**

Two men are fighting for a wilderness empire—which is the scoundrel and which the hero?

MAN BITES CHAMP—*Short Story* . . . . . **William R. Cox** **49**

First set to Mr. Marlow—the kid who has just learned the difference between a doublecross and a half volley

THAT YOU MAY REMEMBER—*Short Short Story* . . . . . **Howard Maier** **55**

Watch these men die, son of a traitor, and remember how they died—and why

FORWARD INTO BATTLE—*Conclusion* . . . . . **Charles Marquis Warren** **57**

Now the legions come marching, and only a dead man's voice can halt their destruction

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MEET THE ARTIST **23**

Men Who Make the Argosy—Stanley Maxwell

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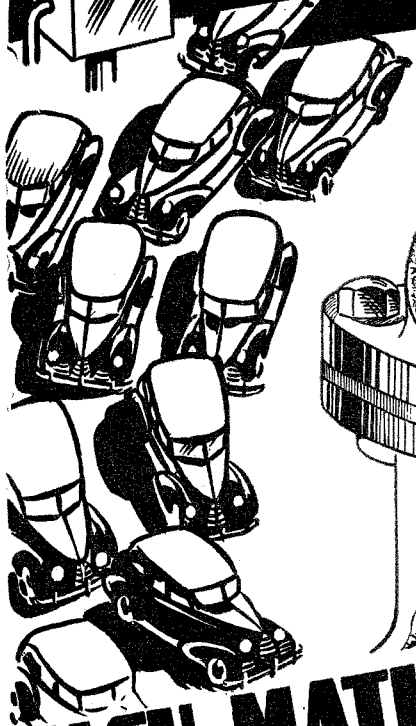

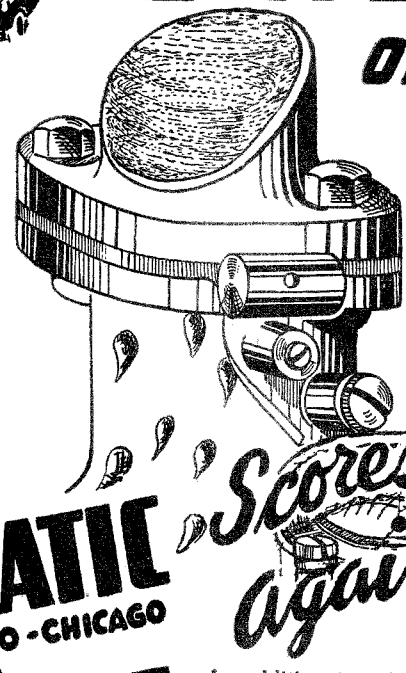

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Five Aces West

By Cliff Farrell

Author of "Big Gus," "Dead Men's Cargo," etc.

It's a weary and a dangerous trail to Utah. But if you have to go, brother, ride with Duke Cool. He dresses like a dandy; but he gives first-rate lessons in poker, in Christian charity, and in the proper application of a left hook

CHAPTER I

CARAVAN OF DESPAIR

THE caravan surged through the bleak driving rain and hub-deep mud of the Laramie Plains with arrogant, resistless power, spurning the elements and spurning the evidences of disaster which lay on every hand: for this trail was strewn with the bones of animals, and the junked wagons of so many thousands who had failed in the past.

Seven hundred miles astern was Leavenworth, and the Missouri settlements. A few miles ahead stood Fort Emigrant on the Platte River. Nightfall would find them camped there. Beyond were the Rockies and the Idaho country where some of them were bound with trade to be bartered for furs. Still farther—much farther—were the destinations of the remainder: Oregon, California, or the busy silver camps of the Washoe in Nevada.

The travelers were well equipped to win their way through to their various objectives. There were thirty canvas-hooded wagons in the line, each built of oak and hickory and bow wood. Even the lightest of them had eight corn-fed, cat-hammed oxen in span. The bigger Pittsburgh freighters, loaded to their hoops, were each powered by fourteen plodding beasts which were the pick of the Missouri bullyards.

The caravan made a picture of primitive force, and even of grandeur against the drab background of the rainswept plains, and a regret touched Duke Cool as he rode nearer that it was not within his skill to preserve such a vital scene in canvas and color.

Duke Cool was regarded as an artist in his particular vocation, but he had never used a palette or painter's brush

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Duke's hands shot out: a right hook caught Gan Keeler on the jaw, a left straightened him, and another right sent him down

in his life. Still he had an eye for beauty of this kind, as well as an appreciation of the allure of a pretty feminine face or a glance from a flirtatious eye.

However it was the more practical matter of finance and ethics that had caused him to look up this particular wagon train as he headed westward, bound for the Washoe. As he rode among the lurching wagons his dark eyes scanned the faces of the bullwhackers and swampers and overseers in search of the man he sought.

His passage aroused a faint antagonism among the muddy, leather-booted men who had not had opportunity to shave or furbish themselves recently. But it also kindled a flutter of animated interest among the petticoated members of the company, who peered from beneath lifted wagon flaps or from the shelter of the towering bows.

To all of them, even the middle-aged and motherly, Duke Cool accorded a courtly bow, lifting his fine beaver hat. But to the youngest, and especially the comeliest, he swept his hat elegantly low, and his white teeth showed in the warmest of smiles against his olive-tan, handsome features.

He singled out one girl in particular and his flashy palomino single-footed grandly at a touch of his knee. The girl was fair-haired and sat like a queen beneath the forward bow of a big Springfield freighter. Slim-throated, with proud features framed in a fashionable poke bonnet, she wore a gold thimble on her slender finger as she toyed with her needlework.

"A thousand pardons, miss," Duke Cool said, leaning from the saddle as if fearing to miss the music of her voice. "This, I trust, is the caravan captained by Nathanial Standish?"

THERE was perhaps a trace of cool calculation in her violet eyes. Duke Cool excused this on the grounds that she was, no doubt, much sought after, and therefore experienced in classifying her suitors.

What she saw seemed to meet approval. Beneath his ulster Duke Cool wore fawn-gray broadcloth afternoon coat and bell-bottomed checked trousers which were obviously the product of a fashionable St. Louis tailor. His pleated shirt was immaculate in spite of the weather.

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A pigeon's-blood ruby smouldered against the background of his jade green stock. His tooled-leather saddle was pointed with horn silver. Even the sleek, mouse-colored pack mule which carried his belongings, sported a red tassle on its hackamore.

"This is the Standish company," she acknowledged.

Duke Cool's delighted expression indicated that he was her devoted slave for being the bearer of such glad tidings. The fact was that he had known since leaving Julesburg that this was the caravan he sought. He knew, from descriptions given him, that this girl was the daughter of Nathanial Standish.

"Ah!" He smiled. "I trust then that we shall be fellow travelers on the remainder of this tedious journey. I too, am bound overland. One more favor, I beg of you. Is a certain gentleman named Gan Keeler a member of this company?"

"You should find Keeler among the bullwhackers, I imagine." She shrugged. "He is wagon boss for Mr. Brady Bledsoe, the trader, I believe. You might inquire of Mr. Bledsoe. You will find him riding ahead with my father, Nathanial Standish."

A chiding voice spoke from the depths of the wagon, and she withdrew at once. Duke was favored by a haughty glance from the girl's mother, who was petulant-faced and tired of travel.

Duke replaced his hat and rode jauntily ahead. Brady Bledsoe, riding pilot with Nathanial Standish, twisted in the saddle and identified him without pleasure. The name of the overland trading company Brady Bledsoe owned was painted on the tilts of eight of the heavily-laden wagons. Bledsoe's manner indicated that he was not overjoyed by Duke Cool's appearance on the scene. They had met on a certain occasion in the past.

Duke singled out a bull-necked, black-jowled man riding a saddle mule as he oversaw the efforts of Bledsoe's whackers.

"Greetings, Keeler," Duke said as he pulled up alongside the man. "I learned in Julesburg that you were accompanying this train. It is a raw, blustery day on which to transact business. I trust I am not inconveniencing you."

Gan Keeler's small, cloudy eyes went sullen and hostile. "What's eatin' you, Cool?" he demanded.

Duke produced a small leather pocket case, opened it and brought out several slips of paper. "These," he said, "are I O U's signed by you, which I held as obligations after a poker game in St. Louis last spring. You neglected to take care of this matter before leaving town, my friend. The total is seven hundred and fifty dollars."

Gan Keeler was slab-muscled, deep-chested. His tough, thick features bore the scars of more than one barroom and wagon camp combat. His big, bruising fists, and the wicked belt knife and six-shooter he carried represented the only authority his hardcased bullwhackers respected. A man who bossed a wagon train in the Indian country had to be tougher than the men he commanded. Gan Keeler filled the requirements.

He looked at the papers with vast scorn. "If you rode acrost the plains to dun me fer thet money, Cool," he said, grinning, "you've wasted yore time." Then he added sanctimoniously, "I always figgered there was somethin' queer about thet poker game anyway."

"Meaning that you think the game was crooked?" Duke questioned politely.

"Yo're damned hootin' I do, mister."

Duke sighed regretfully. "When a gambler loses money in a poker game," he mused, "then the gambler is regarded as a square-shooting, honest person. But when the gambler wins, he is classified as a crook. It's all so inconsistent. Well—I regret this, Keeler, but it seems that I must insist on payment."

DUKE'S hands shot out, closed on Gan Keeler's slicker. He leaped from the saddle, dragging the man down into the mud with him Keeler, taken by surprise, uttered a grunt of anger, braced himself, and swung a devastating punch.

He missed. He did not get another chance to swing. A right hook caught him on the jaw, rocking his shaggy head. A left straightened him, and another right sent him spraddle-legged, his knees suddenly rubbery. He reeled; Duke measured him methodically and knocked him cold with a final smash.

Gan Keeler hit the mud full length and lay there, his eyes rolling whitely.

"That," Duke remarked, "was worth seven fifty. I figure I'm paid off now."

Brady Bledsoe put spurs to his horse, and came storming to the scene, followed by Nathanial Standish.

"What in damnation?" Bledsoe roared.

"Only a trivial business misunderstanding," Duke said. "Our mutual friend Keeler left a financial matter unsettled when he left St Louis. I was merely calling the error to his attention."

"A poker debt, hey?" Bledsoe snapped.

"A poked debt," Duke nodded.

"Who is this fellow?" Nathanial Standish demanded. "It seems to me I've seen his face somewhere."

"No doubt," said Bledsoe. "He shows up here and there. He's a gambler. They call him Dandy Duke Cool."

"Gambler?" Nathanial Standish looked shocked. He was a sparse-fleshed man with a long neck and a dewlap of wrinkled skin beneath his chin. He was somberly garbed; and his voice had the rolling quality of one much in the habit of preaching, or of quoting the Scriptures. His ascetic, lined features, and his fierce cold blue eyes were uncompromising. His pursed mouth was intolerant of all vices.

He eyed Duke condemningly. "Do you mean that you had the impudence to start a brawl over a gambling debt here in the presence of respectable men and women?"

Duke straightened his cuffs. "Some men buy corn or hogs, or merchandise, hoping to sell them at a profit," he said reflectively. "They're gambling, in other words. When they sell they expect to be paid. It happens that I am a buyer of poker hands, hoping they will prove profitable. When I lose I pay my losses cheerfully. When I win I expect to be compensated."

Nathanial Standish glowered. The comparison had hit home. The two wagons he owned were loaded with flour and hardware which he expected to sell at a handsome profit in the Nevada silver camps.

"Bah!" he snapped. "A dose of tar and feathers would be proper payment for sharpers of your stripe. Mr. Bledsoe, we are wasting valuable time here. This brazen fellow is holding up the entire company. The wagons are stopping. We must make haste at once if we are to camp at the Fort tonight."

"Stretch out!" Bledsoe bawled. "Keep 'em rolling."

Whips popped, and the halted freighters lumbered into

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motion again. Men placed Gan Keeler's stunned body in one of the wagons. Nathanial Standish wheeled his horse, and rode back to his place as pilot.

BRADY BLEDSOE lingered a moment eyeing Duke sourly. "You asked for grief when you slugged my wagon boss," he said. "Gan Keeler will be looking for you when he wakes up."

"May I depend on that?" Duke said, brightening. "I'm beginning to doubt that I got my money's worth after all."

"Maybe I'll tell Gan to hold off—for a while at least," Bledsoe said ironically. "You took me for more than a thousand dollars in that game in St. Joe last fall. You were covered with luck that night, Cool. I've been waiting a chance to lock horns with you again—before anything violent happens to you. I rather pride myself on my stud game."

"Let us both hope, in that case, that nothing violent happens to me," Duke stated.

He watched Bledsoe ride away. The man wore the garb of a prosperous trader. He was big and brawny with sandy red sideburns and florid features. Some day he would become fat and gross. Now he acted the part of a gentleman. He had earned a reputation as a successful Indian trader, and owned a chain of trading posts beyond the Platte He was said to have the confidence of both the army and the tribes.

Duke saw the trader pause beside the Standish wagon, and lift his hat to the fair-haired girl. Marcia Standish smiled at him and fell into gay conversation. Her glance lifted once, and she looked icily through Duke as if he did not exist. She had heard the news that he was a gambler.

Duke now became aware of a stir of interest along the line of wagons. Whackers were peering ahead, craning their necks.

"It's a pack o' them cussed Saints," a voice guffawed. "Look at 'em wallerin' in the mud like hawgs."

Hoots and catcalls arose from Bledsoe's tough wagon men. Through the slatting rain Duke saw a forlorn swarm of activity off the trail ahead.

A long line of grotesque two-wheeled vehicles were drawn up in the rain. There was one prairie wagon in sight with four yoke of gaunt, exhausted oxen in span. The wagon had slid off the trail into a buffalo wallow, and was bogged down to its bed in the gumbo.

Weary, rain-soaked men in ragged homespun were laboring to free the vehicle, but their efforts were futile. Duke saw skirted figures in shawls and capes working in the mud along with the men.

It was a Mormon handcart party, bound for Salt Lake to join Brigham Young's Deseret colony. Duke estimated there were nearly a hundred and fifty men and women in the company. Many small children stood forlornly huddled in the cold rain watching their parents.

On foot, accompanied only by one ox-drawn supply wagon, these people had dragged their cumbersome carts by hand over the plains from Leavenworth.

The Mormons sighted the oncoming bulltrain, and a swirl of hopeful excitement arose. A delegation of three men, headed by a gaunt, patriarchial leader, came hurrying to meet the caravan.

Duke rode to within earshot as the Mormons accosted Nathanial Standish and Brady Bledsoe.

"Praise the Lord," the patriarch said, his bearded face marked by fatigue and the evidence of short rations. "Help has arrived at last. Ye see our plight, brothers. Our oxen are unequal to the task of freeing the wagon from the bog. The loan of one of your teams to assist us to Fort Emigrant would earn our eternal gratitude."

Nathanial Standish's austere face was like stone. He did not rein down his horse, but kept moving ahead. The aged Mormon was forced to stand aside or be trampled. Standish passed him by as if he did not exist.

"Forward," Standish bawled. "No dallying. Forward."

"Wait, in the name of mercy," the Mormon implored. "We have sick men and women in that wagon. We have money to pay for your trouble. Not much I admit, but—"

Nathanial Standish rode on, paying no more heed than if the man had been one of the mounds of bunch grass.

"Why don't you send for Brigham and his apostles?" Brady Bledsoe jibed at the Mormons. "Maybe they could preach you out of the mud."

The Mormons stood by helplessly as the caravan ploughed past. A wailing sound of despair arose as the handcart people realized the Gentiles were not intending to stop.

CHAPTER II

A GAMBLER SHEDS HIS COAT

BLEDSOE'S tough whackers hurled taunts at the Mormons as they swung their whips and urged the teams to greater speed ahead. But other travelers belonging to Standish's party remained silent. They were frowning and dubious. It was evident they sympathized with the Mormons, but were reluctant to oppose the domineering man who acted as their spokesman.

"Assistance to such people would be an affront to the true Word," Standish said scathingly as he rode on. "Truly they have earned the wrath. Did they not learn their lesson at Nauvoo?"

"Fanatics like that never learn anything," Brady Bledsoe answered. "Look at 'em. Down on their knees in the mud. Prayin' for a revelation, I reckon."

Duke watched the Mormons kneeling in the deep mud around the stalled wagon, and heard the pathetic wailing of the dispirited children. Touching the palomino he rode among them. Their thin, ragged attire was pitifully inadequate for this weather. The handcarts also were showing the stress of the journey. Rudely built, the majority of them were held together by ropes and plaited thongs of rawhide, or strips torn from blankets or clothing.

Duke's palomino disdained the deep mud, but he forced it to the bogged wagon and peered inside. The interior was jammed to suffocating capacity with sick men and women and children who had succumbed to the rigors of the trail.

Duke returned to where Brady Bledsoe and Nathanial Standish were leading their caravan relentlessly ahead.

"What price do you ask, Bledsoe," he inquired, "for one of your Pittsburghs, and about five yoke of your best stock?"

Bledsoe stared. "What's that? Price?"

"I'm in the market for a bull wagon. It's just a whim of mine. Name your figure for a wagon and ten oxen. I don't want the contents, of course. You can transfer the merchandise to your other wagons. You will still have seven, and they can handle a little extra weight on to the fort. It's less than three miles ahead, I believe."

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Nathanial Standish had turned, listening. His head reared challengingly. "I believe I understand," he said caustically. "Your gambler friend sees a chance to turn a profit by hiring or selling a wagon to those sacrilegious scum back there."

Even Brady Bledsoe found something grotesquely amusing in that. The thought of making a profit from the forlorn handcart people was ludicrous. The poverty of the Mormons was all too apparent to an unbiased eye.

But Brady's commercial instincts were aroused. He scented a chance to turn a profit. He cleared his throat judiciously. "I don't see how I can spare a wagon," he began. "I—"

"We'll skip the usual trading methods," Duke said curtly. "I detest haggling. You not only can spare a wagon, Bledsoe, but will be happy to dispose of it. Part of your trade is intended for your post at the fort ahead. I'm giving you the chance to get rid of an outfit you won't need any longer. Name your price."

BLEDSOE hemmed and hawed. He pointed out one of his wagons, the most battered of the eight. "I could let you have that one, Cool. Along with five yoke for—say five thousand dollars in cash."

"Christianity"—Duke sighed—"thy name is sometimes greed. Five thousand! That outfit probably set you back around fifteen hundred at Leavenworth. A neat profit in six week's time, Bledsoe."

"Take it or leave it," Bledsoe snapped, following the accepted procedure of horse-trading.

He plainly expected haggling, and was prepared to slash the price. But Duke pulled a heavy money belt from around his waist, and began counting out gold coin.

"Sold," he said. "Write out a bill of sale."

Nathanial Standish, standing by, was flabbergasted. "Wait," he exclaimed, stunned disappointment in his eyes. "Why, sir, I have a wagon I will sell you for four thousand—"

"Too late," Duke said. "You had a chance to speak up. I've closed the deal with Brother Bledsoe. And I'm a man of my word, as well as a fool with my money."

"And it ain't exactly friendly to try to whipsaw me," Bledsoe snarled at his companion, forgetting for once his gentlemanly diction. "Keep your sharp snoot out o' this."

Duke paid over the money. He carefully read the bill of sale, nodded and pocketed it.

The wagon train halted. Bledsoe organized his crew for the task of distributing the contents of the vehicle among his seven remaining wagons.

"Lively," Bledsoe ordered. "Handle those bags with care. I'll flay the hide off any fool that fumbles."

Duke saw that all of Bledsoe's wagons were loaded with flour in strong cotton sacks of the hundred-pound weight. His brows lifted a trifle. Bledsoe had a reputation as an Indian trader, but flour was a commodity scorned and despised among the meat-eating plains tribes who knew nothing of its use. He decided that the flour was destined for the army forts and outfitting stations along the trail which catered to white men.

With a score of husky men moving at a trot, the work of transferring the load proceeded swiftly. Duke waited in the rain, chewing a cheroot, ignoring the covert gibes of Bledsoe and his hard-case employes. The news of the price he had paid for the wagon had gone around, and he was looked on as a fool and a sucker. He saw even Marcia Standish and her mother tittering scornfully as they talked it over with other women in the company. Duke lifted his hat and bowed cheerfully in the girl's direction, but she turned her back on him instantly.

THE last of the bags of flour were being moved when a little stump-legged swamper slipped in the mud and went sprawling. The bag he carried hit a rock almost at Duke's feet.

Brady Bledsoe came running to the scene, white with rage. He kicked the fallen man to his feet, then sent a fist crashing into his face, hurling him into the mud again.

Bledsoe snatched up the fallen sack. The cloth covering had burst, and flour spilled down the trader's clothes. He acted like a man demented as he turned and sent the ruined sack hurtling into a rain-filled gully off the trail where it sank out of sight.

His fury subsided then. His quick, shrewd eyes rested briefly, searchingly on Duke. It seemed to Duke that Gan Keeler and many more of Bledsoe's unsavory wagonmen were also watching him with keen alertness. He had an eerie impression of an electric tension in the air, a feeling as if he were the vortex of an unseen, inexplicable storm of violence that needed only a word or a spark to touch off.

Bledsoe's burst of fury had seemed unreasonable and childish to Duke. The destruction of one sack of flour was petty in comparison to the profit the man was making on the wagon. But Duke caught the faint tang of whiskey in the air. That, apparently, was the explanation: Bledsoe was doing some secret tippling. His explosion was due to whiskey nerves.

Duke shrugged and turned away. The more he saw of Brady Bledsoe the more he despised the man. He wondered what a girl like Marcia Standish could see in him.

The wagon was cleared of the last of the flour.

"It's all yours, Cool," Bledsoe said, patting his money belt with satisfaction.

"Stretch out," Nathanial Standish bawled, still disgruntled. He gave Duke a scathing glance. "A fool and his money," he sniffed.

"Keno," Duke agreed cheerfully.

The whackers hurrahed Duke for his gullibility as they plodded past. Gan Keeler rode by on his mule, but offered no verbal taunts. However, his pale eyes were flat, dangerous. Gan Keeler's jaw was swollen and bruised. He had not forgotten.

Duke looked at the Mormons who were still struggling desperately to free their bogged wagon. He threw away his rain-soaked cheroot and dismounted into the mud. Picking up a goad he ploughed through the gumbo and unhooked the five oxen he had purchased; then prodding them around he headed them toward the stalled wagon. The Mormons stood watching. When they realized that help was actually coming a shout of joy went up.

"Praise be. The Lord has answered us. Praise be!"

"The Lord will feel more kindly toward you if you'll give me room to handle these mud-crawlers," Duke said.

A small, muddy figure which had been laboring in deep mire around the stalled wagon, came wading eagerly to his side.

"Give the gentleman room! Make way! Give him a hand! Step lively!"

Duke grinned in amazement. The muddy Mormon was a girl, though he had to look twice to make sure; for though she wore skirts, they were plastered by rain and mud

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to her figure so that at first glance she might have been mistaken for a boy.

But no boy was this Mormon girl; and neither was she a child. She was trim-waisted, shapely, and with a rich share of vital beauty. A sunbonnet, so sodden it was only a rag, framed a vibrant face. Gray eyes, big and with depths of womanly perception, regarded him. Small freckles dusted her forcefully tilted nose. Her cheeks showed the pallor of overwork and short rations.

Duke picked her up bodily, carried her clear of the ooze. "A bath and a square meal would make a raving beauty of you," he predicted. "Which wife are you? Number five? Or maybe number seven? And who's the lucky man?"

She drew herself up. For the first time in his life Duke Cool felt suddenly abashed in the presence of a girl.

"My father is in that wagon—ill," she said simply. "I want to be near him. I want to help."

She left him, and went wading through the mud back to the wagon.

DUKE tooled the oxen into position. He sank to his waist in water and gumbo. Because his soggy ulster and undercoat were an impediment to his activity he stripped them off, and cast them impatiently away. His fine linen shirt became a mass of mud as the oxen floundered about in the ooze. He threw his hat away also because it interfered with his movements.

The handcart people swarmed around, proving more of a hindrance than a help as he hooked his team in ahead of the exhausted beasts which had given up the effort.

He took a bullwhip from the hand of a Mormon. The lash crackled with a report that sent the long string of oxen surging forward against the yokes as if they had heard the voice of final authority. The bogged wagon moved. With a sucking sound the mud heaved, and the running gear labored clear. Slowly the vehicle rose from the buffalo wallow and lurched to firmer ground above.

Duke scraped mud from his face and grinned.

"Bless ye, brother," the leader said fervently, and the words were echoed by a hundred voices. "I am Jethro Sloan, elder in the church. And ye—?"

"Duke Cool is the name."

"Ye are a trader, perhaps?"

Duke looked ruefully at his mud-filled boots, and scraped more mud from his face. "Nope," he said. "Gambler. I prefer stud to draw poker. More action."

"Gambler?" Jethro Sloan tugged at his beard. He was a rawboned man, with craggy features and kindly eyes. He turned to his followers. "Let us pray for the salvation of Brother Cool's soul," he boomed. "Let us lift our supplication that he be led into the paths of righteousness"

"Hog-wash," Duke snapped. "My soul can wait a while longer. There's work to be done. Transfer some of those sick people to my wagon. I'll split up my team and whack you ahead to the fort. Shake a leg. It'll be dark before long, and making a wet camp after sundown never was my idea of good solid fun."

In spite of himself his glance wandered to the Mormon girl. It angered him to find that her lips were moving in prayer, and that her gray eyes showed pity and sympathy—for him.

Duke impatiently busied himself preparing the two wagons. The gusty rain chilled him to the bone as he labored with the heavy trace chains and yokes.

A clear voice spoke at his side. "This will help." A blanket was thrown over his shoulder. It was the gray-eyed girl. Her lips were blue with the cold. Except for a sodden shawl around her shoulders she had no protection.

With explosive wrath Duke jerked the blanket from his shoulders and wrapped it around her. "And save your prayers for those who need it," he snapped.

She bit her lip in humility, and hurried away. But soon she was back carrying the hat and coat and ulster he had abandoned. "At least take these," she pleaded. "They're wet and muddy, but will be some protection. I had intended to—to dry and clean them in camp tonight before returning them."

Duke accepted them with sudden meekness. But as soon as she was out of sight he wrapped the fine broadcloth coat around two shivering children, and forced the ulster on a woman who was shaking with the ague.

CHAPTER III

HUNCH-PLAYER

DUKE piloted the two wagons the three miles to Fort Emigrant. Bleak, rainy dusk was setting in when they sighted the stockaded military post which stood on a bluff overlooking the muddy Platte.

Below the bluff a mongrel settlement had sprung up with Brady Bledsoe's trading post as its nucleus. Half a dozen bars and gambling houses catered to the soldiers of the garrison and travelers of the trail. Lights gleamed invitingly from these places, and the music of a hurdygurdy drifted through the rain as Duke led the weary Mormon handcart train nearer.

The caravan captained by Nathanial Standish had usurped all of the flat adjoining the settlement; their wagons were spread out so that the highest, dryest ground was occupied. The tired Mormons were forced to make out as best they could in a brushy mudflat near the sullen river.

Firewood was wet and stubborn; and it was an hour before the place began to resemble a camp at all. Duke frowned as he watched Jethro Sloan deal out the rations. It was plain that the provisions were at the vanishing point.

"You've got seven hundred tough miles ahead of you," he said to the elder. "And you're about out of grub. How do you aim to make it through?"

"We must buy provisions here," the elder explained. "We had hoped the Lord would provide us with buffalo on the plains, but none were to be found. We have a little money set aside for such emergency. I will go to the trading post and buy what we can. Help from Deseret will be awaiting us when we reach Fort Bridger."

The elder and two of his lieutenants walked to the settlement to dicker for provisions. But they returned soon, with despair and defeat in their faces.

"No grub to be had?" Duke questioned.

"There are provisions at the post," the elder said sadly. "But for Mormons the price is one dollar a pound for flour and salt and smoke meat. Beans are the same. Blankets and clothing are priced at their weight in gold And our funds are limited—very limited."

Duke squatted by a fire, drying out. He watched the gray-eyed Mormon girl—Zoan Jessup—who had a group of the smaller children gathered around a fire where she was cooking and telling them gay stories, keeping their minds occupied, doing what she could to cheer them. Yet

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—as Duke had already learned—her mother had died two weeks ago on the plains, and her father was a patient in the sick-wagon.

DUKE listened to the faint hurdygurdy music from the settlement. He hefted his money belt and smiled wryly. The belt was empty. The money he had paid for Bledsoe's wagon had taken his entire capital down to the last gold piece.

He fingered the ruby stickpin in his bedraggled stock. That stone was worth two thousand dollars. His ivory-handled six-shooter could probably be sold for cash in the settlement. And there was his palomino and the pack mule.

He arose and moved casually to where Zoan Jessup was busy with the children. "Wish me luck," he said. "I'm superstitious about gals with pretty red lips."

She straightened, studying him gravely, and the compliment he had passed actually did bring the natural color back to her shapely lips for a moment.

"I was watching you," she admitted. "I believe I know what's in your mind. Elder Sloan learned in the settlement that you bought that wagon and oxen with your own funds in order to help us. It took all your money, didn't it? Now you're thinking of risking that beautiful ruby in a—a gambling game."

"It wouldn't be the first time," Duke said lightly. "That's the way it came to me: in a poker game."

"It's sinful," she said meditatively. "But—but—wait!"

She hurried away among the handcarts in the darkness. In a few moments she was back. She drew Duke away into the shadows. She was coloring excitedly. She thrust something into his hand.

"It's—it's all I have," she breathed. "You're welcome to it."

Duke looked at the two five-dollar gold pieces which lay in his palm.

"I—I do wish you luck," the girl whispered.

Duke was silent a moment. He had his full share of gambling superstition. He recognized a true hunch when it touched him. Suddenly he pocketed the money and nodded.

"You've bought a partnership in a stud game tonight, Mormon gal," he said. "I reckon the Lord will overlook this sin—at least as far as you are concerned."

"And you will be forgiven also," she said positively.

Somehow during the exertion of setting up camp she had found time to change from her rain-soaked garb to a dark skirt and tight-bodiced waist whose severe lines gave her a poise and dignity. She met his gaze levelly, without false humility. She knew she was comely, desirable.

Duke kept remembering that as he rode out of camp on the palomino. His garb was bedraggled, but his bearing was jaunty as he jogged into the rough settlement. His course had carried him past the Standish camp on the flat, and he had glimpsed Brady Bledsoe paying court to Marcia Standish, who sat in comfort beneath a wagon-sheet shelter near the warmth of a roaring fire.

BLEDSOE'S trading post was the biggest structure in the settlement and he glimpsed wagon folk and buckskin-clad buffalo hunters in the mercantile room, dickering with clerks for supplies.

With practiced eye he appraised the half-dozen gambling houses. The majority were shoddy establishments, some with canvas roofs and clay floors and plank bars set on whiskey barrels. The biggest and most pretentious was named the Platte Northern. It was frame-built of milled lumber that had been hauled across the plains. It sported stained-glass swing doors.

Duke chose a smaller place for his first foray. With the two gold pieces as his stake he sat in a faro game for an hour. When he cashed in he had three hundred dollars in his pocket.

He had seen Brady Bledsoe return to town from the Standish camp, accompanied by Gan Keeler. They had entered the Platte Northern. Duke now made his way to the bigger gambling house. Its gambling layouts were ornate, and its bar and back buffet would have done credit to a St. Louis establishment.

Play at all the tables was high. One poker table, covered with blue velvet, bore the sign of no-limit action, but this table had no patronage at the time. A silk-hatted, cadaverous man with the flat stare of a professional sat at this table waiting for trade.

Bledsoe and Gan Keeler were tossing off a drink at the bar. Bledsoe looked up as Duke entered, his florid face breaking into one of his supercilious grins. It was plain the man had been expecting Duke to appear.

"Where's your halo, Cool?" he jibed. "Didn't the Saints convert you?"

"I hung the halo on my saddle horn before I came in," Duke said. "I didn't want to get it tarnished.

Gan Keeler said nothing, but bystanders who had heard of the fight at the wagon train edged gingerly away, ready to duck for cover.

Duke approached the blue table. "Greetings, Whitey," he said casually. "I haven't seen you since that game in Fort Smith two years ago, if I remember right."

The gambler, Whitey Jack, nodded. There was no friendliness in him. Whitey Jack was a human machine, who knew every crooked trick in the deck.

Duke took a chair. "It's nice weather to stay indoors and enjoy a sociable game," he remarked. "Any chance of scaring up opposition? Four-handed stud would agree with my mood tonight."

Brady Bledsoe moved up eagerly. "I haven't forgotten that night in St. Joe, Cool," he challenged. "I'd enjoy a chance to even the score. Come on, Gan, if you feel lucky."

Duke's dark eyes were suddenly cold, hard. He looked at Gan Keeler. "Not you, Keeler," he said. "Welchers never sit at the same table with me a second time."

The black blood eddied in Gan Keeler's surly face. He might have drawn then and shot it out, but a hasty word from Brady Bledsoe halted him: "No shooting in here, Gan. It's hard on the glassware. Besides, I want a chance at Cool first. You two can settle your differences another time."

Bledsoe beckoned a sallow, slit-mouthed man who was also patently a house player. "Sit in, Missoula," he ordered.

Duke knew then that he would be playing against the three of them. The signs indicated that Brady Bledsoe, in addition to owning the trading post, was owner of this place also. Whitey Jack and Missoula were his employes.

DUKE placed his three hundred dollars in gold before him, and gave the impression that it was only a beginning. They had no way of knowing this was his entire stake. They took it for granted he was well heeled. Otherwise they could have stripped him in a few hands.

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Duke bet the first hand that was dealt him. He caught black aces and eights. It was the winning hand, and he raked in a small pot. But it was aces and eights—the dead man's hand.

Brady Bledsoe was the bludgeoning type of player. He liked to use the power of his bankroll to bluff his way through tough hands.

Duke played methodically, tuning himself to the run of the cards, feeling out his opponents, testing his luck. He lost an indifferent pot, dropped out of the next two. Then he won. And won again. And again. But that was the run of the cards. He was catching winning hands on fifth card, raking in money without final opposition.

His stake grew to a thousand in half an hour, hung steady for a time, then began to climb again. At the end of two hours' play he was more than three thousand dollars ahead of the game. The cards were running his way.

Brady Bledsoe was drinking hard now, and all his mask of geniality had faded, leaving him surly and dangerous. If Brady had expected help through crooked dealing on the part of his two housemen, he was disappointed. Whitey Jack and Missoula knew their man too well for that; the game was being played on a strictly honest basis.

Two sizeable pots came up. Bledsoe won both of them by slambang tactics. He would raise five hundred dollars at a clip and raise again if the bet was tilted. On both occasions Duke abandoned his hands after seeing three cards, rather than pay heavily to buy his last card.

Bledsoe tried it again a third time, with two aces showing against Duke's pair of fours. And this time Duke met his raise, jumped the bet a thousand dollars. Bledsoe studied him, decided he was bluffing, and called. Duke had a four in the hole, giving him three of a kind against Bledsoe's aces.

It was on the heels of this defeat which shook Bledsoe's confidence that Duke sensed the big break in the game.

CHAPTER IV

BULLETS ARE ACES

WHITEY JACK was dealing. Duke's hole card was the deuce of clubs. His first up card was a queen—the queen of hearts. That red queen reminded him of Zoan Jessup.

Bledsoe's upcard was a black ace. The two house men caught lesser cards. Bledsoe bet three hundred dollars on his ace. The house men stayed. Duke raised it five hundred.

Bledsoe blinked, studied his cards, then examined Duke with shrewd eyes. "Up another thousand," he said.

The house men dropped out. Duke met the raise.

Duke caught the seven of hearts, Bledsoe the ten of diamonds. His ace was still high and he bet five hundred. Duke met the bet.

Duke's third up card was also a heart—the ten. Bledsoe's was another black ace, giving him a pair of aces showing.

Bledsoe bet a thousand dollars. Duke met the bet. He now had thirty-three hundred dollars in the pot. That left him busted, though Bledsoe was not yet aware of it. Every gold piece Duke had won was now on the table.

All other play had stopped in the room while men watched. Soldiers from the fort, buckskin-clad buffalo hunters, and wagon men in hide boots waited in silence.

Duke had three hearts showing above his hole card. His play indicated that he had another heart in the hole and that he was trying for a flush. As a matter of fact, having a club in the hole, he had no chance of topping even the pair of aces Bledsoe had showing.

Whitey Jack flipped the fifth card to Duke. The onlookers sighed. It was a heart also—a king. He had four hearts showing.

Bray Bledsoe caught another ten, giving him two pairs in sight—aces and tens. Bledsoe hesitated for the barest space, and the little blue veins on his florid cheeks stood out a trifle more prominently. That told Duke all he wanted to know. The two pairs were all Bledsoe had. A ten or an ace in the hole would have given him a full house, which would have beaten a flush. But the whole card was worthless. And two pairs were worthless against a flush. That was what Bledsoe was thinking.

Bledsoe tried to bluff it, tried to appear that he was holding a full. He beckoned a bartender. "Fetch me some money," he ordered.

He shoved fifteen hundred dollars in gold into the pot.

Duke reached up, removed his ruby stickpin. "This is worth two thousand," he said. "Whitey Jack will verify that. I won it from Whitey a couple years ago. I'll drop it in against your fifteen hundred. And—"

He produced a slip of paper. "Here's a bill of sale for a wagon and bull team I bought today, worth five thousand dollars," he added suavely. "I'll shove that in at face value as a little sweetening."

Bledsoe slapped a fist on the table. "What the hell?" he jeered. "Five thousand dollars fer that—"

"Surely it didn't deteriorate in value in only a few hours," Duke said quietly. "You set the price yourself today when human beings were in need of help out there. You don't mean to go back on your own word, do you? This is only a poker game. There are no children wailing in the rain, or sick people waiting for help, Bledsoe. Surely you won't haggle now."

The score of bystanders lifted a brittle murmur of approval. They had head the story of the wagon sale, but hadn't heard it the way Duke was telling it. Up to now they hadn't given much thought to the wailing children or suffering Mormons. They were thinking of it now.

Brady Bledsoe realized he was in an ugly situation. His sharp dealing had boomeranged. As as face-saving gesture he was forced to acknowledge that slip of paper he had signed.

He looked down at the bill of sale. To meet Duke's bet meant shoving five thousand dollars in cash into the pot. "You're bluffin'," Bledsoe said. He was pulling his breath in and out with an effort. "You're tryin' to run a sandy."

"So?" Duke said, his brows arching.

Bledsoe glanced at his house players, hoping for some helpful sign. But neither could help him, for they had no way of knowing whether Duke was bluffing.

Bledsoe began to sweat. He studied the cards, studied Duke's face.

Suddenly, with a curse, he picked up his hand, hurled it petulantly against the wall.

"You've got it," he raged. "A flush. Tryin' to draw me into bettin' against an unbeatable hand."

DUKE turned his cards face down, shoved them toward Whitey Jack. Before the man could pick them up, Bledsoe snatched them from the table, and looked at Duke's

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hole card. The action was contrary to the rules of the game. Bledsoe's refusal to call Duke's bet did not entitle him to see the hole card.

Brady Bledsoe looked at the black deuce, and realized he had been bluffed from the very start by a man with greater poker savvy, and steel nerve. "Why you four flushing—"

He propelled his bulk across the table, his fingers reaching savagely for Duke's throat.

Duke shoved his chair back. Sitting there he smashed a fist solidly into Bledsoe's face, sending the man toppling to the floor. He whirled out of the chair, crouching, for he had never forgotten for an instant that Gan Keeler was in this room, nursing his grudge.

Keeler had seen his chance to square accounts. He stood at the corner of the backbar, and his six-shooter was already clear of leather and rising.

Duke fell aside, drawing, as Keeler's six-shooter exploded. Duke fired as he moved, his shot coming as an overlapping reverberation to the blast of the wagonmaster's gun. Gan Keeler's head rocked gruesomely, and a hole appeared above his flat nose. He took a blind step, and he was dead before his slumping body hit the floor.

Duke backed against a wall, his eyes flickering over the room. Brady Bledsoe was on his hands and knees, blinking incredulously at Gan Keeler's body which lay crumpled before him. The two gamblers had ducked to cover, but were making no move to take up the fight. Tough bouncers and bartenders had guns in their hands; but they were hesitating.

"STAND your hand," a knotty-jawed army sergeant barked at the house crew. "That was self defense. I'm backin' Duke Cool's play. Keeler asked for that—an' got it."

A dozen voices chimed in. Bledsoe and his followers were none too popular with the soldiers and plainsmen in the place.

Bledsoe got to his feet. He looked at Duke and at his dead wagonmaster. "All right," he croaked. "All right, Cool. But you can't always be that lucky." He walked groggily down the room and out of the Platte Northern.

"*Gracias,* gentlemen," Duke said to the bystanders.

He took an apron from a barkeep, raked the gold pieces into it, formed a bundle and threw it over his arm. He followed Brady Bledsoe across the muddy street into the trading post. Bledsoe was heading for his private office at the rear of the room, but he paused, glowering as Duke entered.

Duke tossed the bundle of money on the counter. "A dollar a pound is plenty steep tariff for flour and beans and smokeside," he remarked. "But I never was a man to quibble. I'm investing the whole stake in grub. I'll have a bunch of Saints here inside of twenty minutes to haul it away."

Brady Bledsoe's face was ashen with fury. "Do you think I'd sell you an' them damned Mormons grub, an' be paid off with my own money?" he said thickly.

"I reckon," Duke said suavely, "that would be more pleasant than being treated to a new suit of tar and feathers and being toted out of town on a wagon pole. What do you think, Bledsoe? You don't seem to be any too popular with the citizens or the cavalry in this place."

Many of the patrons of the Platte Northern had straggled into the trading post at Duke's heels. "Better sell," the tough army sergeant adviced judiciously. "You named your price, Bledsoe. Stick to it."

Bledsoe was helpless. There was murder in his eyes, but he nodded to his clerks. "Sell him what he wants."

Zoan Jessup came hurrying into the store. White-faced she rushed to Duke. "I heard about the—the shooting. Are you all right?"

"Still footloose and fancy free, little one. We'll go back to camp and fetch Brother Sloan and the wagons. I've made a deal for provisions that will feed your Mormons to Fort Bridger."

"Food?" she said incredulously. "You mean—"

"Grub." Duke nodded. "Enough to fill plenty of craws. It's your share of the poker game."

She stood looking at him. Once again he felt his stature diminish, felt humbleness come upon him.

"Why do you have to be so hard?" she asked.

Duke pointed through a rain-blurred window at men who were carrying a blanket-covered stretcher out of the Platte Northern. "Some men can do things like that and sing psalms afterwards," he said, and his voice was a harsh discord. "But I can't."

Her eyes remained gentle. "That too will be forgiven," she said with conviction.

Duke scowled. "No converting," he warned angrily. "And none of your praying for my immortal soul. It's too late for that." But she had her arm linked in his, and she was smiling mistily as she led him out of the store.

THE clank of a cavalry sword sounded. An army lieutenant and a squad of troopers in heavy capes emerged from the darkness. Nathanial Standish's angular form loomed among them.

"There he is, officer," Standish boomed, leveling a damning finger at Duke. "He killed a man in a gambling row a few minutes ago."

"I'll handle this," the cavalry officer said brusquely. He looked Duke over. "A dozen witnesses say it was self defense, Cool. We'll let it ride that way. But you're out of bounds in Fort Emigrant after tonight. Gun fights breed gun fights. It's damned nasty digging graves in this weather. You'll be on the trail tomorrow, I take it."

"Since you put it so adroitly, Lieutenant"—Duke bowed—"I shall take the hint."

"The fellow should be behind bars," Standish fumed.

The army man ignored him. He walked with Duke and the girl down the street. "Sorry, old man," he said sincerely, "that I had to exile you. Our turkey-necked friend just had a session with the colonel. Standish swings a political club back yonder. He seems to have it in for you."

"My sin was offering help to some insufferable Mormons," Duke sighed. "Also refusing to give Mr. Standish a chance to profit by their predicament."

"I know. I heard all the dirty details. I'd enjoy a poker session with you. But I'd probably be a babe in arms. I've heard of you. However it will be for your own good if you shake the mud of this place from those bench-made boots of yours. Gan Keeler should have been hung years ago. You deserve the thanks of Congress for that little chore. But the fellow has a certain type of friends here who aren't particular which rib they slid a knife under, as long as it's in the back. You—ah!"

A gun had bellowed from the shadows a hundred yards away. The bullet passed between Duke and the army man, missing Duke's cheek by a hair.

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Duke whirled the girl around a building corner, and crouched there, his gun poised, seeking vainly for a target. But the rainy darkness was impenetrable.

"You get my point, I presume," said the lieutenant from the prone position he had immediately assumed nearby.

"I do," Duke agreed. "Fact is I was way ahead of you. I rather expected a calling card, though not quite so soon. It isn't hard to guess whose name was written on it."

The officer and his troopers made a search of the vicinity, but the bushwhacker had made good his retreat.

"Good luck, gambling man," the lieutenant said as they parted. "And if that Mormon gal has a pretty sister, let me know. I've never been to Zion, but it would be worth the trip."

Zoan Jessup clung tightly to Duke's arm as he located his palomino. He lifted her back of the saddle, and they headed for the Mormon camp. She was shaking, but not from the cold. "The cowards," she said between set teeth. "Demanding your arrest. Shooting at you from the dark. Exiling you."

"Life," Duke said, "has its hazards. Also its compensations."

She understood. She laughed softly, pleased.

CHAPTER V

RED MAN'S RIOT

THE Mormons crossed the river next day, using the cable ferry. And Duke accompanied them. "I'm in no hurry," he explained to Jethro Sloan as the party organized on the north shore to resume the march. "And you people need looking after. Use my wagon as long as you need it. Oxen fare better pulling against a load. They walk on their toes. They get sore-footed flatting along ahead of an empty freighter. I'll dally along with you."

Jethro Sloan's wise eyes twinkled. He glanced toward Zoan Jessup, who was rearranging the load on a shambling handcart. "And Sister Jessup, no doubt, could use another shoulder at the wheel," he nodded.

Duke had the grace to grin weakly. The call to stretch out was sounding along the line. Men and women—and children too—were applying themselves to the cumbersome carts.

Duke approached the girl, who was struggling with her vehicle. "I'll handle this go-devil," he said casually as he ducked beneath the shafts and put his shoulder to the bar. "You better trail with the hospital wagon and look after your father."

"Dad is better today," she said. She was smiling. He had not seen her really smile before. It was worth watching. "The fever has gone. He'll be on his feet in a day or two."

"Then ride the palomino," Duke commanded. "He's gentle with pretty girls and kids. He gets that from me. He can carry some young ones. And so can that lazy mule. I've told the elder to use both of them in giving a lift to the carts whenever needed."

Ahead the Mormon band of four pieces of brass struck up industriously, giving forth the stirring, rhythmic beat of the handcart marching song. Every voice in the long line took up the refrain, sending the challenge loud and clear over the Platte:

For some must push, and some must pull,
As we go marching up the hill:
As merrily on the way we go,
Until we reach the Valley—O!

Zoan Jessup's head was up, her tawny hair blowing in the wind. She faced the west, her eyes shining as she sang the words.

The wabbling wheels of the handcart train began turning, heaving through the mud. The two wagons lurched ahead as the bull whips popped, their canvas tilts slatting in the breeze.

The rain had ended. The sun was peering out now through breaking clouds.

Duke leaned against the shoulder bar, dug his fine boots deep, and wrenched the cart from the mud. He sent it forward.

With the weather relenting, and with food enough to stave off the immediate danger of starvation, the Mormon's spirits rose. The handcart party crawled westward, pushing the long miles behind them.

With the days Independence Rock and Devil's Gate fell astern.

NATHANIAL STANDISH'S company, which had lingered three days at the fort, overtook them on the Sweetwater. Standish's party had dwindled to ten wagons, for some of his company had withdrawn from his leadership at the fort, and had elected to wait for some westbound caravan.

Brady Bledsoe and five of his big, heavily-laden freighters accompanied the caravan. Marcia Standish was riding a paint horse alongside the trader as the bull wagons overtook and crawled past the slower-moving handcart train. She singled out Duke in the line of march.

He was no longer the resplendent figure of that first day on the plains. His boots had succumbed to the rigors of the trail. He now wore moccasins, which he had won from a squawman at Independence Rock in a Spanish monte game. His fine pantaloons were ragged, and rolled half to his knees. He was bare to the waist, for the weather had turned hot and dry. Alkali dust had mingled with the sweat on his back, outlining his flat muscles. His skin beneath the dust was tanned a golden bronze.

The passing bullwagons set their course to windward and gave the handcart toilers the benefit of choking clouds of more dust as they surged powerfully past and ahead.

Brady Bledsoe looked at Duke and rode on without change of expression. Duke had been carrying his six-shooter on the handcart; but from that time on he always had it strapped around his waist, or within reach of his hand. And he was careful not to outline himself against the cookfires after dark.

Split Rock and Three Crossings offered their tedious opposition and were conquered. They crawled up the Sweetwater, mounting the imperceptible sweep of the Continental Divide toward South Pass.

Zoan's father had recovered now, and was able to spell Duke at the pushing bar in the easier going. Heber Jessup was a mild-mannered, steadfast man, with an abiding faith in the future.

At such times Duke mounted the palomino, with a borrowed Sharps rifle, and hunted buffalo and antelope to reinforce the supplies. The sign of Indian hunting parties was plentiful in the region, and on one occasion Duke sighted riders in the distance attempting to cut him off from return to the handcart party. He staged a swift retreat in time.

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This was the hunting ground of half a dozen tribes, none of whom were adverse to lifting a white scalp if the sign was right.

They were two camps west of the Crossings, and Duke was a dozen miles north of the trail, pushing through a malpais of yellow buttes, moving in on antelope whose white rumps had flashed distantly in the sun, when he twisted around and watched an overtaking figure.

It was Zoan, riding the grulla mule. She wore masculine breeches instead of a skirt, a garb that was more practical on the trail, but which had brought shocked criticism from the majority of the Mormons.

Her face, beneath the sunbonnet, was excited as she rode up. "I was beginning to think I'd never catch up with you," she said. "A band of Gros Ventres threw a scare into the party not long after you pulled out on your hunting trip this morning. I was afraid you might run unto the Indians and have trouble."

"Gro'vaunts," Duke frowned. "How many?"

"Only a dozen or so. But they were drunk and ugly. They first demanded whiskey. When we told them we had none, they retreated to a distance and fired a few shots that did no damage. They whooped and rode around for awhile. They went away when the men armed themselves and got ready to go after them. We were too many for them."

"Drunk?" Duke questioned. "They demanded whiskey?"

"Several of them had stone jugs of rum. And they were all smeared with something white. It looked like flour. Even their ponies were covered with it. And—and Duke. The men are sure that some of those Indians were carrying those new repeating rifles we've heard about. Henry rifles. That party of Gentiles who passed us yesterday carried a few Henrys, according to some of our men. The Standish company. Elder Sloan fears the Gentiles have met trouble. The wagons of Bledsoe the trader were loaded with flour, you remember. There may have been a massacre."

Duke's dark eyes had thinned. "Flour?" he said slowly. "You say they were smeared with flour. And they had jugs of whiskey. And Henry rifles."

FLOUR and whiskey. The mention of that combination brought flashing into Duke's mind a scene that was almost forgotten. He was remembering that day in the rain on the Laramie Plains, and the burst sack of flour one of Bledsoe's men had dropped. And Bledsoe's volcanic outburst, and the way he had so hastily hurled the broken sack into concealment in a mudhole. And that taint of whiskey that had lingered in the air.

Whiskey was contraband in the Indian country. All passing wagons were subject to search at Fort Emigrant for liquor. Trading in guns and ammunition among the Indians was also prohibited.

"Hell's blue flames," Duke breathed. "A whiskey trader. There was a busted jug in that sack the whacker dropped. And likely a Henry rifle. That's how Bledsoe had got rich as a trader."

He believed he knew now why Bledsoe and his men had eyed him so tensely at the time. They were wondering if he had detected the broken whiskey jug buried in the sack of flour. It explained why Bledsoe had so quickly disposed of the incriminating evidence. It was a prison offense to smuggle whiskey into the Indian country.

The girl was startled by the wild look in his eyes. "Which way did those Gro's head when they pulled out?"

"Back up the trail. Later on some of the men scouted around and saw another party of Indians off in the distance, riding in that same direction. They were too far away to make much out of."

Duke glared at her. "With the country full of drunken Indians, you came out here alone to warn me. Are you loco? Are your father and Jethro Sloan crazy too, to let a girl do that?"

His voice was rough, angry. But she did not quail. "They didn't know I was leaving until too late to stop me," she admitted. "I'll get a jawing for it I suppose."

"You ought to be spanked. Hell's fire. You might—"

"Don't swear, Joseph. It is unseemly."

Duke glared helplessly. "How did you catch on that my front name is Joseph?" he demanded.

"I noticed it written on the tailor's tag that day you threw away your coat on the plains. It is a good Christian name, Joseph."

"Blast my name. You're heading back to the outfit now as fast as— No, confound it. I can't send you back alone. You might bump into some more drunken Gro's."

"But you're coming with me," she exclaimed in dismay. "Do you hear me? The Indians are on the warpath. There's likely been a massacre already, and—"

"Quit screaming at me while I think," Duke said. "I've got a hunch there's been no massacre—yet. But there probably will be one unless somebody stops a certain whiskey-peddling hypocrite."

HE LOOKED at the girl, and suddenly all the harshness drained out of him. "You've got to go with me," he said reluctantly. "I can't let you wander alone out here. If anything happens to you—"

He left it unfinished. There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "The way you said that makes me feel that I really count, even if I am a Mormon girl," she murmured with false meekness.

Duke looked sardonically down at his tattered garb. "How well you know that," he stated. "You made a dray horse out of me, didn't you? I've wallowed in mud, eaten dust, fought barroom brawls, scratched flea bites, blew in all my money, and have been run out of an army post as an undesirable. You and your prayers. You and your psalm-singing Saints."

She was still meek. "You will be rewarded in heaven, Joseph."

"Bah! That's a long time to wait. Well, come on. We're riding to overtake the Standish company. They can't be more than a dozen miles ahead. They only passed us two days ago. It's time they learned they are traveling with a rum peddler—if it isn't too late."

He told her the story of the broken flour sack. "It all ties together," he said. "I wondered why an Indian trader would be packing flour. Indians have no use for flour, except to daub themselves and their horses. But Henry rifles —The devil ought to be strung up."

The Henry was a new gun that was just beginning to make its appearance in the West. Firing eighteen shots, it was a tricky but devastating weapon in comparison to the usual percussion guns and muzzle loaders.

"All of Bledsoe's wagons are loaded with flour," he said. "Which means that there probably are rifles and whiskey in every sack. He fooled the army by saying he was bound for Virginia City, I imagine. Instead, he was aiming for the Snake River to trade rotgut and arms to the Indians for

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furs. He's likely met the tribes moving toward Fort Emigrant with their pelts to trade, and has grabbed a chance to make a quick and early profit.

"I've seen samples of what whiskey does to the Indians. It's like grabbing a bear by the tail. Once you start feeding them whiskey they won't let you quit."

She nodded, her eyes wide.

He led the way westward. Following the shelter of bluffs and breaks in the plains, staying off the skyline, they pushed ahead as the westering sun crawled down the sky ahead of them. Twice Duke halted, and they remained under cover while distant streamers of dust that might have been stirred by antelope or Indians vanished into the horizon.

Duke finally pointed, and the girl saw a tiny line of white dots far to the west. It was the Standish caravan, following the brushy course of a stream more than half a dozen miles away.

"They'll be camping soon," Duke said. "We'll overtake them by dark."

THEY were crossing a small stream when Duke again halted suddenly. The girl's breath caught in her throat as they listened to a faint, disturbing uproar in the distance.

Duke slid from the saddle, tossed her the reins. "Wait here," he said.

He pushed through the brush upstream, and the uproar grew louder in his ears. Working his way through thickets he at last lay flat, peering out at an Indian camp on a sand flat.

It was a temporary hunting camp of only three lodges, but there were twenty or thirty warriors in sight, drunk and daubed with paint. The place was a bedlam. Coated with flour the warriors were reeling around in an alcoholic frenzy. The squaws and children had withdrawn into the background in fear. Duke saw two or three dead or wounded Indians lying about, victims of crazed campfights that had broken out. Even as he watched, a tomahawk battle was staged to its bloody conclusion by two frenzied Gros Ventres.

In the background loomed one of Brady Bledsoe's big trade wagons. Bledso himself was not present. Four of his hard-faced men were working frantically, loading bales of beaver plews and bundles of winter-trapped marten and wolverine pelts into the wagon.

Empty bags, and the white flour scattered over the camp showed the method of trading. Duke saw a dozen broken whiskey jugs. Many of the Indians were brandishing Henry rifles.

Bledsoe's traders kept glancing apprehensively at the howling Indians as they worked feverishly to pull out. The Gros Ventres suddenly became aware that the whites intended to depart. Their mood changed, and they surrounded the wagon, brandishing weapons. Duke knew nothing of the language, but that was hardly necessary. The Indians were demanding more whiskey.

The wagon men argued, pleaded, and then became desperate. A warrior tried to climb into the wagon, which still contained a half load of flour bags. One of the men felled the inquisitive brave with the butt end of a bullwhip.

That was a fatal mistake. With a scream the crazed Indians fell upon the four. It was over almost before Duke realized it was happening. The four whiskey traders died swiftly in the midst of the howling horde that fell upon them.

CHAPTER VI

THE GUNS ARE EMPTY

DUKE was white-faced. Nausea crawled in the pit of his stomach as he silently began to retreat from that scene. As he crept away he sighted another, bigger party of Gros Ventres hurrying to the scene. The word of the whiskey trading evidently was spreading over the hunting ground, attracting every thirsty warrior within reach.

Duke returned to the girl, and they retreated from that place. Dusk was coming now, offering welcome concealment as they pushed ahead. They soon sighted the far beacon of wagon fires marking the Standish camp, which was still some two miles away.

They had not covered half of that distance when Duke halted, and they peered at the movement of light near at hand in the creek brush ahead. The deep voices of white men drifted faintly to them. And they heard the thud of tools.

Scouting ahead Duke discovered another of Brady Bledsoe's wagons drawn up amid the brush alongside the wagon trail, with the idle oxen chewing their cuds as they waited. The big Pittsburgh, which was loaded to the tilt with flour bags, was tilted drunkenly on a broken axle.

Four disgruntled men were laboring by candle light, lightening the load, and jacking up the wagon in preparation for repairs. It was evident the remainder of the caravan had pushed ahead to a better camp site for the night, leaving the crew to take care of the disabled freighter.

Duke stepped out of the brush. "Forget about the wagon —tonight at least," he said tersely. "That bunch of Gro's that Bledsoe tried to trade out of their furs have tasted blood. And they're still thirsty, for both blood and rum. They've wiped out your pals, and they may be hunting more scalps tonight."

They stared, recognizing him. "Air you tryin' to say that Moosejaw, an' them other boys air—"

"Dead," Duke nodded. "They stayed too long in that Indian camp. I happened to be watching when it happened. Those Gro's are on the warpath for fair. And more are joining them. Whiskey draws Indians. Better make fast tracks to the main camp. If any trouble starts there every man who can fire a gun will be needed. Better hide this wagon. I reckon it's filled with whiskey too. And rifles. Let's hope the Gro's don't stumble onto it."

He helped them drag the crippled wagon into deeper brush where it was fairly well concealed. They freed the oxen, and Duke rode ahead with the girl while the bullwhackers hurried along on foot at their heels.

Full darkness had settled when they rode into the Standish camp. It was pitched on a grass flat that sloped gently toward the stream. The stock herd lolled in deep, rich graze. The wagons were thrown into a loose half circle which fronted on a swift, deep mountain stream of icy trout water which swept smoothly in a narrow channel thickly overhung by black willow and aspen.

The aroma of frying trout arose from the cookfires as they rode past the wagons. The circle was ragged and open, for Indian trouble along this section of the trail had been infrequent and minor since the unmolested days of the forty-niners.

This was only the dawn of the twenty-year war in which the Sioux and their allies were to contest bitterly every inch of a losing battlefield. Men were not yet disciplined

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in forming the tight frontier phalanx which was to be the bulwark of wagon camps in the future.

DUKE rode to the central fire, singling out Nathanial Standish's ascetic figure. Brady Bledsoe was present there, along with Marcia Standish and her mother.

Standish rose to his domineering height as he recognized his visitors. He glowered at Duke, and gave the girl an intolerant stare, scorning the masculine breeches she wore.

"Standish," Duke said. "I'd keep my stock caught up tonight, and a double guard out. I'd pouch this wagon circle tighter, and see to it every man keeps his guns loaded, and handy. A big bunch of Gro's are gathering less than ten miles away, and they're painting for war."

He looked at Brady Bledsoe. "Those furs your trade wagon brought weren't such a bargain," he said. "Moosejaw and the three other men you sent to that Indian camp aren't coming back—ever."

Brady Bledsoe went white.

"What's the fellow talking about?" Standish snapped.

"I don't know," Bledsoe said hollowly. "Are you loco, Cool?"

Duke said: "I ought to put a slug in your rotten heart, Bledsoe. But I might need the bullet later on."

"You dare come here and insult my friend?" Nathanial Standish roared. "What—"

Zoan caught Duke's arm. "Listen!" she breathed.

They all heard it now: a deep, sullen murmur in the distance. The sound resolved into the oncoming drone of many unshod hooves. Now the gusty, explosive outburst of savage lungs came through the darkness.

"Indians," Duke snapped at the gaping wagon people. "They've come faster than I figured. Guns! Guns, you fools! Arm yourselves! Are you deaf as well as dumb? Can't you hear?"

They broke into bewildered, horrified confusion. Women scattered, screaming for their children. Men blundered dazedly around, fumbling in the wagons for stored weapons.

Duke turned, snatched up Zoan, tossed her aboard the palomino. "Clear out of here," he commanded. "Ride for it. You can make it across the creek. They're coming from the other direction." He slapped the horse into motion.

A deep sigh arose from the wagon folk. A rising moon had topped the bluffs to the east, and its light picked out the shadowy wave which moved out from the deeper shadows of the brush into the open flat north of the wagon camp.

Men lifted rifles to their shoulders. But Duke shouted a command. "Hold your fire. They're not attacking yet. They wouldn't come like that if they were ready to fight."

The Indians came on whooping and milling about. But it was still only an aimless display. Duke judged there were now nearly two hundred Gros Ventres in the party.

"Wait," he ordered again. "Don't open fire. Does anybody speak their lingo?"

A French breed bullwhacker nodded.

"Order them to halt where they are," Duke said. "Tell them to come no closer. Keep them at a distance. If they try to move in I'll give the order to fire. They've got us outnumbered eight to one or better. Your only chance is to keep them away until we can fort up."

The bullwhacker lifted his voice, rattling the Indian jargon.

The Gros Ventres came to a halt and sounded derisive, angry yells. Then one, who evidently was a chief, brought silence long enough to make himself heard. He rode in advance of the main body, swinging a lance and speaking at length.

"He say, *m'sieu,* he want to trade de furs for de whiskee, *oui?*" the breed reported.

"Whiskey?" Nathanial Standish exclaimed in disgust. "Tell them we have no whiskey."

"He won't believe it," Duke said dryly. "He knows it's here. Stall him off, Frenchy. Be long-winded about it. Play him along, so as to give us time to shove these wagons together and barricade."

Standish caught Duke's arm belligerently. "I resent your implication that we are carrying whiskey," he thundered. "I—"

DUKE turned to one of Brady Bledsoe's wagons nearby. He reached up, dragged a bag from the load, let it thud on the ground. Taking a knife from the belt of a swamper he slashed the cloth with a swift stroke, and kicked into view a wicker demijohn, and the dismounted parts of a Henry rifle.

"All right," he said. "Now you see what brought the red ants to the picnic. Wake up, you lard bellies. Jam those wagons together. The Gro's know what these Bledsoe wagons are carrying. They've had a taste of it already. Get your kids and women in the clear. Barricade beneath the wagons. Bust open more of these sacks and set up all these Henrys you can find. Dig up ammunition."

Bledsoe was retreating toward the shadows of the creek brush, but Duke overtook him with long strides.

"No welching," he commanded. "You're not sifting out of camp now, leaving your friends to pay the piper. They'll need every trigger finger soon."

He slapped the man in the face so hard Bledsoe hit the ground on the seat of his breeches. Duke's mock jauntiness left him then. "I'll kill you in your tracks if you make another move to escape," he said.

The French breed was making a lengthy reply to the Indians. Under cover of that delay the wagon men swarmed frantically about, rolling the vehicles together. A measure of calmness returned, and they worked with desperate speed heaving out barrels and casks of supplies and personal effects to form a hasty barricade for defense. Other men were frantically breaking out rifles from the flour sacks stored in the three Bledsoe wagons in camp.

A roar of fury arose as the Indians realized what was going on. The French breed broke off his rambling speech, and dove hastily to cover. "Queek, *m'sieurs,*" he screeched. "Dey are coming, *oui?*"

"Wait, in God's name!" Nathanial Standish screeched, addressing the Indians, forgetting the difference in languages. "We'll give you whiskey if that's all you want."

He appealed to the interpreter. "Talk to them. Tell them they are welcome to the vile stuff if they will only let us alone."

"No!" Duke snarled. He caught Standish by the shoulder, sent him violently spinning away. "Tell them if they come nearer they'll go to the happy hunting grounds in a hand basket. All they need is a little more brave-maker and nothing on earth would stop 'em. Whiskey makes 'em think they're bullet-proof. Whatever you do don't offer rotgut.

"Talk big to them. Tell them we have many, many guns that shoot all day and all night without reloading. And that we're all dead shots. Tell them every man here has

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counted coup fifty times on greater warriors than any brown-skinned, dog-eating Gros Ventre that ever lived. A hundred coups. That's the only talk they'll heed now.

"The rest of you get ready to shoot and shoot straight. Don't miss. Pile 'em up. You men with the Henrys. Don't waste powder at long range. Those repeaters don't carry enough kick to kill a rabbit except at close quarters. Then they really talk."

The interpreter began a grandiose speech, but it was drowned out by a new roar from the Gros Ventres. And the sound was different. It was deeper, purposeful, suddenly filled with racial hatred.

And then the Indians were coming.

"WAIT!" Duke kept chanting. "Save it for closer range. Then pile 'em up. Don't miss. Shoot to kill. Don't let them reach the wagons. They've got us outnumbered . . . . *Now*—give them holy Hell!"

There were some thirty guns in the hands of the defenders; but only three had Henrys which were effective, for it had been impossible to put any of the guns from Bledsoe's wagons into operation in the short space of time.

A ripple of powder flame whipped from the line of wagons. Sharps, Spencers, and Springfields were in action.

The Indians were massed, and the storm of lead tore a gap through their ranks, piling up ponies, sending wounded warriors toppling beneath milling hooves.

Duke had fired a single shot Sharps which he snatched from a woman. Then someone pushed a loaded muzzle-loader in his hands, taking away the empty Sharps. It was Zoan. Duke couldn't believe it. He had taken it for granted that she had escaped across the stream minutes ago and was by now safely on her way back to the Mormon camp fifteen miles east.

But there was no time to talk. The Indians had reeled but recovered, and were charging closer. In spite of the speech of contempt he had put in the interpreter's mouth Duke knew that the Gros Ventre were a fighting tribe.

For hectic seconds it looked as if they would carry the wagon circle and come to knife grips with the outnumbered whites. But thanks to the three Henrys the Indians broke at the last moment, stricken by their losses. Their was chief had gone down; the attack had been unplanned and hurriedly launched, and they were at a disadvantage.

The confused mass of warriors recoiled, then turned, racing away to cover of the timber.

"Saved!" Nathanial Standish croaked. "We were too much for the bloodthirsty rascals. They've learned their lesson."

DUKE watched the vague movement of the Indians in the moonlight. "You're crowing too soon, mister," he said. "This was only the first skirmish. They're spreading out to circle us. Hear 'em crossing the stream above and below us? Get busy. Move some of those wagons around to close this circle, or they'll be cross-firing us from across the crick in a minute."

Subdued, the defenders hurried to obey. Duke ran through the camp, kicking the cookfires apart, stamping out the embers. Rifles opened up as the Indians found positions across the creek with the moon at their backs and the deep brush for cover. The firelight was blotted out, but the moon was bright enough for fairly accurate shooting.

Slugs snapped around Duke. Henry rifles were in action in the hands of the Gros Ventres. A bullwhacker was killed in his tracks, and another wounded. That reduced the fighting strength of the party to a scant score, for four men had been slain in the first Indian onslaught, and three more were seriously wounded. Several others were nursing minor gunshot wounds.

"Stay under cover," Duke ordered. "Here you—and you—and you. Do you know anything about rifles? Get those Henrys from the Bledsoe wagons cleaned of flour and loaded. Get busy. Break out every gun and set it up. You'll find a rifle and a jug of whiskey in every bag of flour. We're outnumbered, but with that many repeaters we ought to be able to hold all the Indians this side of kingdom come. Where's Brady Bledsoe?"

"Layin' here bleatin' like a bogged sheep," said a whiskery wagon man named Jake Sevier. "I spotted him tryin' to sneak away across the crick, so I tunked him on the head with my shootin' a'rn an' hog-tied him. Want me to put a slug in him, sir?"

He said it with such evident eagerness that Duke Cool grinned. Then he was moving away, saying over his shoulder:

"Use your own judgment, though it's a waste of powder. The army will hang or send him to the calaboose for life for this little stunt he pulled. And never mind the 'sir'. I wouldn't know who you were referring to. Save it for the first gentleman that comes along."

Duke was roaming about, peering for someone. At last he located his quarry.

"So there you are," he said scathingly, towering over Zoan Jessup. She was with the women, working on the wounded and dying men who had been moved into shelter back of a barricade of wagon boxes.

"Where's my palomino?" Duke demanded. "By the blue flames, didn't I send you high-tailing out of this mess?"

"I'm sorry." She sniffed plaintively.

"Don't you be a-talkin' to this lady thetaway," a spunky wounded man bristled at Duke. "I seed her give the hoss an' mule to thet high-toned Standish gal an' her maw so they could light a shuck out o' camp ahead o' the Injuns. An' this leetle lady done some fast gun-loadin' fer us when the red devils was comin' at us. You got no right to bulldoze her around."

Duke looked about, and saw that Marcia Standish and her mother were gone from the wagon camp.

"Oh hell," he said helplessly. "Do unto others . . . and all that, eh!"

He picked the Mormon girl up in his arms, lifting her clear of the ground. He kissed her resoundingly on the lips. Kissed her again.

"Oh, Joseph!"

"Wal, thet's better," the wounded man approved.

For a moment she stayed close to Duke, with her face against his shoulder; and he was quite unaware of the sound of the Indians' guns.

An excited man came racing up, disregarding the searching bullets of the Indians who had sighted his shadow in the moonlight. It was one of the three Duke had assigned to the arms detail.

"We're out of luck," the man groaned. "We've got rifles enough to patch Hell a mile, but there ain't a handful of ammunition for the Henrys to be had. Brady Bledsoe says the ca'tridges air in the wagon thet broke down before we camped. It's settin' back down the crick more'n a mile away. It might as well be on the moon with all these Injuns around."

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CHAPTER VII

DOWNSTREAM TO DESTRUCTION

DUKE raced to where Brady Bledsoe lay tied hand and foot, guarded by the grim-lipped Jake Sevier. "Is it true, Bledsoe," he asked tersely, "that all the ammunition is in the crippled wagon down the crick?"

Brady Bledsoe looked shrunken and old. He had a purple welt on his head where Jake Sevier had felled him with a gun muzzle. He winced each time a bullet passed near, and cringed whenever a war cry sounded.

"It's in that wagon, packed away in sacks of flour," he mumbled. "And about seventy rifles are on that wagon too."

Frowning, Duke snapped:

"How many Henrys were in that first wagon that Moosejaw took to the Indian camp?"

"Forty odd," Bledsoe admitted.

"How many cartridges?"

"About four thousand rounds."

Duke was silent a moment. The Indians, in addition to outnumbering the defenders, held a staggering advantage in guns and ammunition.

"Stay near me, Cool," Bledsoe said hoarsely. "These fellows are threatening to hang me."

Duke thought of the shot that had been fired at him that night in Fort Emigrant. Bledsoe must have guessed what was passing in his mind, for he uttered a moan of despair, and fell silent.

Nathanial Standish bent over the bound man. "You fiend!" he raved. "You brought this on us. We'll burn you at the stake, rend you limb from limb!"

Duke turned away, leaving Standish to his futile denunciation. He moved around the wagon circle, taking an inventory of the company's armament. The result was none too encouraging. The supply of shells for the Henry rifles had been nearly exhausted in repelling the first attack. Less than thirty shells remained for the repeating guns.

There were more than a score of Sharps, Springfields and Spencers in camp, but they were single shot guns, and many of them were muzzle loaders as were the four shotguns he counted. The defenders assayed only five cap and ball six-shooters

"If the red brothers really come at us for a finish fight we won't last long," he told Jake Sevier, who was showing a quality of leadership that ranked him as a man to depend on. "Right now they're a little wary of us, for they suspect we may all have Henrys and are ready to give them a warm welcome. But they'll learn after daybreak that we aren't so tough."

The Gros Ventres made a sortie at that moment. A skirmish line charged in from upstream. They came on foot and used the dark brush as cover. The attack was repelled with small loss to the Indians, but the last of the shells for the Henrys was exhausted.

"It was only a feint to feel us out," Duke shrugged. "They didn't really mean it that time."

But another of the whites had been killed in the skirmish and a child had been wounded. The Indians now settled down to harassing sniping duel. Another wagon man was killed, and a woman was hit, before the defenders learned it was death to expose themselves above the barricades.

DUKE wriggled to a vantage point and lay peering at the creek which rushed swiftly past in its deep, brush-shaded channel in the moonlight only a rope's length away.

He spoke to Nathanial Standish. "The Mormon handcart party is only about fifteen miles away. There are seventy or eighty men in that outfit able to fight. And downstream is a wagonload of Henrys with plenty of ammunition. I doubt if the Indians know about that abandoned wagon."

Wild hope tore at the man. "We must get word to these Mormons," he exclaimed. "They must come to our assistance."

"Must?" Duke chided caustically.

"Surely even a Mormon would not stand by and let savages massacre us? They couldn't be that inhuman."

"Aren't you the same lard belly who refused to give a helping hand to these same Saints back on the Laramie Plains, or have I got things twisted?" Duke remarked.

Zoan Jessup, who had been within earshot, busy with the wounded, came crawling nearer. "Stop it, Joseph," she said reprovingly to Duke. And then to Nathanial Standish: "My people will send help, of course. It will take time for them to get here, but they will come. I'm sure of that. Your wife and daughter should be nearly to our camp by this time. I told them to follow the stream. They can't miss the camp."

"Sure," Duke said grimly. "The Mormons likely will be fools enough to try it. All they've got to fight with are a few old muzzle loaders, and their bare hands. They'll walk into two hundred Indians who're packing guns that never stop shooting. It'll be great sport—for the Indians."

Standish protested wildly. "But the Mormons can arm themselves from—"

"From Bledsoe's wagon down the crick? Use your head, man. Even if your daughter knew about that wagon do you think she's the kind of a person to be the first to tell the world she has been flirting with a whiskey peddler? That's one subject that won't be mentioned to the Mormons. Anyway your women-folk don't know the truth about Bledsoe, or about the rifles in that wagon. They pulled out of camp before the story came out.

"We must get word to those people somehow," Standish chattered. "If they are properly armed they can scatter these savages easily."

There was a silence. Jake Sevier spoke heavily. "How in Tophet is anybody goin' to get out of this trap? Them Injuns has got us sewed up."

"There's the stream," Duke observed quietly.

"Gawdalmighty! Them Gro's will be watchin' the crick a-plenty. They're smart enough to know it's the way we might try to slip somebody through. An' in this moonlight—"

"It's the crick or nothing," Duke said. "There's no other hope. Too much open ground in all other directions."

AGAIN there was a silence. "A man who keeps his head," Duke added, "might drift through under water. He could weight himself down so he would stay well under the surface. That stream is swift and deep along here. And overhung with brush. A man could push himself to the top now and then under cover of brush to get a fresh lungful of air."

"How would you know you wasn't comin' up jest where some brave was squattin' with a tommyhawk in his paw?"

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"That," Duke said dryly, "is what will make it interesting."

The silence fell again. "Who'll go?" Nathanial Standish demanded insistently.

"I'll make a try at it," Jake Sevier growled.

Three or four other men muttered a willingness to volunteer. But Standish remained silent.

"Can you swim?" Duke asked Jake Sevier. "Do you know how to handle yourself under water?"

Reluctantly Sevier shook his head. Of the other volunteers, only one had confidence in his ability. And this man, though he tried to make light of it, had a bullet wound in his right arm.

Duke sighed dolefully. "A man who can't swim would only be committing suicide. It'll be tough enough even for anyone who knows how to take care of himself in deep water. I was hoping there would be at least two of us. Even if one hit bad luck the other might wriggle through."

"You?" Standish questioned eagerly.

"Unfortunately I know how to swim," Duke remarked. "As a kid I spent half my time diving for coins at the St. Louis steamboat levee."

The Mormon girl suddenly burst into tears. "You can't do this alone, Joseph. I—"

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Duke held her in his arms a moment. "The moon's getting higher," he said huskily. "I better step lively. It'll be a long walk to that Mormon camp. I'll likely catch cold traveling in wet clothes. I aim to be back by daybreak."

He released her, tried to occupy his mind with the business of preparing for his attempt. From the blacksmith stores he selected a three-foot length of strap iron. The object had weight enough, he decided, to offset the buoyancy of his body, without serving as an actual anchor. It would also come in handy as a weapon.

Wearing only breeches and moccasins, and with a skinning knife in his belt, he made a swift survey of the terrain. Buffalo and alder brush offered cover the few rods to the stream.

Men whispered encouragement, patted him on the back as he wriggled through the barricade, and out of the wagon circle.

Only an occasional shot was being fired by the Indians. Gunflame darted twice from the thickets beyond the creek as Duke wriggled ahead, but the bullets were aimed at the wagons. They had not sighted him.

Willows and aspen overhung the stream as he drew himself to the margin. A filter of moonlight laid a ragged silvery pattern on the black surface.

DUKE lowered himself over a four-foot cutbank into the water, and was scarcely aware in the tension of the moment of its icy chill. It was deep water against the brushy cutbank, and his feet did not find bottom. He clung to a protruding root for a moment to get his bearings.

Faint movement in the brush above his head startled him. Then a shadowy figure slid over the cutbank into the water beside him.

It was Zoan. She also carried a length of iron rod as a weight. She had tied a cloth around her hair to keep it in place. She clung there beside him, only her head showing above water.

"I too can swim," she murmured.

"Go back," Duke groaned. "You can't try this."

She shook her head. "You said there would be a better chance if two of us went. I can handle myself under water. I've known how to swim and dive since I was big enough to walk."

Duke saw that it would have to be this way. There was no turning back now. It was impossible to climb back over that overhanging, brushy cutbank without making a commotion that would certainly attract the attention of the Indians. Protest was futile, regrets were vain.

"I'd hate to play poker with you in a freeze-out," he murmured, and his lips brushed her cheek. "You've got too much sand. I'll lead the way. Give me a minute's start. Two minutes. And pray that the stream doesn't shallow below this point."

He kissed her again. Filing his lungs he sank beneath the surface, and sent his body gliding downstream with a powerful shove.

CHAPTER VIII

UNTIL WE REACH THE VALLEY

DUKE let his body go limp, conserving his energy and letting the current do the work. He used the iron rod to fend himself away from bottom and from the bank. His body touched obstacles now and then, or collided with cutbanks as the stream rushed him along in its meandering course. But it was deep clay channel through the flat, with no boulders.

He could see the deep shadows of the brush and the glow of moonlight on the surface above. At intervals he pushed himself beneath those black shadows, and came to the surface in silence among water-trailing foliage to replenish his lungs. Then he would sink again, and let himself drift onward.

Time and again he rose. He judged that he was now nearly clear of the flat. Suddenly the current sharpened, and he was carried with a rush through a small rapids, between big boulders. He collided with a boulder with breath-taking impact and went chuting down a five-foot cascade into the boiling plunge of a sizeable pool.

He drifted clear of the troubled water beneath the cascade and was carried toward the downstream outlet of the pool. He thought of the girl who likely was drifting downstream to plunge into this same danger.

The rapids had taken him by surprise. His lungs were compressing with the need for air. Full moonlight played on the lower end of the pool. He tried to stay submerged, but the stream widened and shallowed, gathering momentum as it left the pool. A cross current drove his drifting body to the surface in spite of his efforts. The water was less than waist deep at this point, and he lifted his head, gasping for air.

As he did so he heard a startled whoop. He glimpsed three or four warriors leaping into the water ahead and around him. He had been discovered by sentinels stationed at this point.

He braced himself against the current, and came to his feet in the water. He swung the length of iron and landed a glancing blow that sent the first Indian sprawling beneath the surface.

A gun exploded in the hands of a warrior on shore, but the shot missed. There was no more shooting, for Duke was surrounded by Indians in the next instant.

He was thinking of Zoan, who was no doubt drifting toward this same trap into which he had fallen. Clawing

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hands were grabbing at him, seeking to pull him down. He sensed they wanted to take him alive. The length of iron was jerked from his hands. He had no time to get out his knife, and he tried to fight them off with his fists.

But they were too many. He reeled, fell, rose again and fought his way through the shallowing water toward a dry gravel bar, carrying the battle away from the spillway of the pool.

An Indian got a hand grip on his hair, and the flat of a tomahawk glanced from his temple. His senses reeled.

He managed to flounder ahead, carrying a screeching opponent on his back. In that instant he believed that he saw a vague shadow, and a floating sheen of tawny hair drift by in the rush of water out of the pool, and vanish downstream. But the Indians were too busy with their capture to notice.

The tomahawk struck again then and Duke fell on his face in ankle deep water. That was all he remembered for many minutes.

HE CAME slowly back to painful realization that he was still alive. A pole had been passed between his bound hands and feet, and he was being carried by two Indians in the manner of a deer carcass. Half a dozen more Indians trotted along ahead and back of the burden bearers, and took turns shouldering the pole. His swinging body collided roughly with boulders and crashed through the brush as they labored with him up the ascent from the stream.

He played possum, though at times this was not entirely pretense. Blood dripped from a gash on his head. Now and then cold nausea overcame him completely, and he lost track of events for minutes at a time.

He aroused to find himself being carried into the midst of a score or more of excited Indians. A small campfire burned in a swale. He could hear the occasional report of a gun nearby, and he realized he had been brought back to the vicinity of the besieged wagon circle.

He continued to pretend unconsciousness, but was prodded out of his pose when a knife point was pushed against his ribs. He winced, and a howl of delight arose. He opened his eyes.

He was jerked to his feet, and slapped and prodded around by ungentle hands. A painted Indian came dancing at him twirling a steel hatchet, whose whetted blade looked razor-sharp. The brave made a great show of his dexterity as he whooped and leaped, keeping the hatchet whirling in a dazzling arc around Duke's head, grazing his hair many times.

Other Indians arrived to slap and upbraid him, and dance around pounding their chests while they shouted in boastful dialect the story of their prowess as warriors. Duke understood they were counting coup on him.

In other circumstances he might have felt flattered, for in the Indian scheme of things to have so many braves count coup on a single captive was proof that they regarded the victim as a man of ability. But Duke knew this was only a preliminary to something else. They had let him live this long for some purpose. He refused to speculate on what that might be.

The coup counting went on hour after hour. Midnight passed. From the number of warriors who visited the camp in relays for the ceremony Duke guessed that more Gros Ventres had arrived to join the siege of the wagon train. Vigilance over the embattled wagons was not allowed to lapse. Duke heard scattered firing continue.

He fixed his thoughts on one objective, and that helped fortify him. He kept Zoan's face pictured in his mind. One thing was certain: at least she had not fallen into the hands of the Indians. There might have been other rapids below the one where he had been captured, and her body might now be—

He refused to consider that also. At least it would be better than being a prisoner of the Gros Ventres.

THE coup counting dwindled. A paunchy, flat-nosed chief at last gave an order; and Duke was freed from the sapling to which he had been tied all night. The thongs were removed from his ankles; he was kicked and prodded into walking. They marched him through the brush. He soon saw the creek flat ahead, and the besieged wagons.

The moon was sinking behind fleecy clouds to the west. The morning star was kindling in the east.

From the signs Duke saw that the Indians were organizing for a general attack to storm the wagons.

He lifted a shout, "Get set, men," he yelled, his voice carrying sharply over the flat. "They're coming at you soon."

An Indian smashed him in the face with his hand, silencing him, half stunning him. But he had sent his warning.

They tied him to a tree on the edge of the clearing. Warriors went scurrying about, hunting dry brush. They heaped the brush around him until he was submerged to his shoulders. They were going to burn him alive there under the eyes of the wagon folk. It was a plan calculated to horrify the defenders and destroy their courage.

An Indian was sprinkling gunpowder over a twisted wisp of dry grass. Another stood ready with flint and steel to ignite the torch. Gray daylight was beginning to etch out the timber as formless shapes.

"Jake!" Duke called. "Jake Sevier! Can you hear me?"

"I hear yuh, sir," the bullwhacker's voice came faintly from the wagons. "But cain't see you. Too dark. Whar are yuh? Has them devils got yuh?"

"They've got me. But there's still a chance. The girl may have got through alive. Fight to a finish. But your first bullet is for me, Sevier. You'll be able to see me in a moment. Do you understand? They're making ready to burn me. Shoot straight. Don't miss. I'll thank you for it."

There was a moment of silence. "I'll do it, sir," Jake Sevier responded. His voice was heavy, weary.

Sparks were flying from the flint. In the timber the Indians were moving forward, setting themselves for the charge.

The powder had not yet ignited. The flint was stubborn.

Duke's head lifted. He listened to a deep, vibrant murmur that rolled through the dawn. It erupted into the crackle of gunfire from the downstream end of the clearing. He heard Indians screeching.

The skirmish welled into a strident, booming uproar of rushing, oncoming men. The gunfire spread, ran through the brush until the flashes formed a long, arcing line that surged nearer at the pace of running men.

The Indians were breaking The warrior with the flint and steel came to his feet, staring for an instant. Then he too was running.

Bullets were raking the thickets. Duke saw warriors falling, sprawling in full stride. The gunfire was now a sustained roar, proving that many repeating rifles were in operation.

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The oncoming line swept through the timber, rolling up the Indian formation in a flanking attack that left a heavy toll of dead and dying underfoot as it surged onward.

Bullets snapped around Duke. Then the oncoming line of Mormons reached him. He made out Elder Jethro Sloan's gaunt, angular form in the thin light of daybreak. The elder paused only long enough to kick away the pile of brush and slash the bonds that held him.

"Sister Jessup is back there, brother," the elder roared, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "Praying for your soul. She believes you are dead. She found us as we were making forced march to the assistance of the Gentiles. A Gentile girl and her mother had arrived at our camp earlier, riding your horse and mule. They told us of the Indian trouble. Sister Jessup led us to an abandoned wagon and we armed ourselves with these fine weapons. We smashed many whiskey jugs, and proceeded at forced march."

Duke walked like a man in a dream back through the ranks of the Mormon fighting line. He located the rear guard, and saw the small, wan-faced figure among them.

She came toward him slowly, her lips moving in prayer.

"Joseph," she said. She fainted dead away into his arms then.

She was still in his arms when the Mormons and the rescued wagon folk came streaming back after abandoning further pursuit of the fleeing Indians.

SOUTH PASS was now astern. Ahead lay the forks of the great trail. To the left was the route that led by Bridger's and through Echo Canyon to Salt Lake. The trail to the right followed the Fort Hall route to the Humboldt.

The handcart people were pushing eagerly ahead, inspired by this milestone, knowing now that their journey was well on its way to success.

Duke and the girl halted, standing in the bars of the Jessup handcart.

"Which way is it to be?" he asked.

She smiled remotely, as if it were an immaterial question. "It is for you to say, Joseph. Wherever you go, I will go."

"We'll toss a coin at the fork," Duke said. "Right?"

"Right," the Mormon girl agreed. "Though it will be frowned upon by Elder Jethro."

Duke lifted his voice in song, and the girl joined in. The entire company took up the refrain:

For some must push, and some must pull,
As we go marching up the hill;
As merrily on the way we go,
Until we reach the Valley—O!

Together they put their shoulders to the bar. They sent the handcart surging forward.

THE END

Men Who Make the Argosy

Meet the Artist—Stanley Maxwell

IF YOU turn the page after reading this, and then turn back to pages 55 and 58, you will see two arresting pieces of work by one of ARGOSY's happiest discoveries—an artist with unusual imagination, an individual technique, and a fine feeling for his business.

Stanley Maxwell wandered quietly into our art department one day a few months ago and asked to show some pictures. In practically no time after that he had illustrated a story in Sea Novels magazine; and it was such a success that the ARGOSY staff went right in and nailed him for our public. A good idea? Take a look at the pictures in this issue and see for yourself.

Maxwell is quite possibly the only man in the world who ever illustrated a plastic surgery operation before it was done. A woman approached him one night and asked him to whip out a preview of her new face after a forthcoming operation. He took it in his stride.

And yet this youngster (born 1919) once wanted to be a fireman! By various stages he also aimed at being a mechanic, a cop, an architect. After finishing high school in Long Beach, Long Island, he wavered between college, and art school, where his art teacher saw his talents trending.

To the art teacher, Miss Evelyn Steiner, go our orchids. She insisted, and Stanley went to work with a soft pencil. After three months in an advertising art class he decided he preferred illustration, and proceeded to work his way through Pratt Institute. This he did in various ways: painting portraits at fifty cents each, jerking sodas, delivering this and that, and washing dishes at Sloppy Joe's in Long Beach.

IT IS pleasant to be able to round out the story on a genuinely idyllic note. A short time ago we had a telegram from Mr. Maxwell, arriving on the very day on which we expected him to show up with a picture for us. It said:

JUST MARRIED. HAVING A FINE TIME

Since then, silence. After the honeymoon, however, we expect to see him back in the office—with a devastating life-size portrait of the lady. Meanwhile, our blessing on them both.

(P.S. Mr. Maxwell came into the office as this was being written. Beamingly he told us that we were more or less responsible for the culmination of a four-year romance. So ARGOSY *is beaming too.)*

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Swords In Exile

By Murray R. Montgomery

Author of "The Scarlet Blade," "Rakehelly Ride," etc.

Ho for the Cardinal's men! With sword in hand and peril their companion, Cleve and d'Entreville carry the might of Richelieu into a traitors' paradise

CHAPTER I

THE MASTER OF FRANCE

THE day was one of blue and gold and the veins of the city — the narrow, twisted Parisian streets — were swollen with life, raucous with the yells of hawkers, the clatter of hoofs and the rumble of wheels. But quiet hung over the Cardinal's palace, the quiet of efficiency, as Sir Harry Winthrop's travel-dusty coach rolled past the headquarters of the guard into the courtyard.

A glittering fountain, pluming spray, centered the expanse of cobbles, while metal hitching-racks, stone stanchioned and topped by leonine heads of bronze, appeared to right and left. In a far corner a squad of the Cardinal's Guards were drilling—drilling smoothly against the handsome facade of the east wing, their crossed surcoats dazzling in the sun, their sword-hilts a-gleam.

The coach came to a stop and Sir Harry descended. Ten days ago he had sat opposite the Earl of Strafford at Whitehall to plead vehemently for a French appointment. But now, pacing down the red-carpeted corridors of the palace, he began to experience his first full elation of relief. Strafford had insisted that he take the Venetian mission. In Venice he wouldn't have to match wits with a man of Richelieu's obvious genius. The thought was comforting.

His guide ushered him ceremoniously through a Gothic archway—an archway portiered in maroon, guarded by resplendent halbardiers—and into a large foyer.

"Make yourself comfortable, *monsieur*. I shall announce your arrival. But it may take a moment. *Monseigneur le Cardinal* is extremely busy."

Sir Harry could understand that. He sat down on a plush-backed chair and placed his hat across his knees. The guide nodded, turned and disappeared through an oak-panelled door. Left alone, Sir Harry fell to a consideration of personal issues; namely, the reason for his presence at Richelieu Palace.

The reason was Richard Cleve. Lord Richard Cleve, a brilliant young fool who had become exiled from England because of a fondness for speaking the truth at the wrong times. The truth in this case had concerned ten thousand pounds which had disappeared into the Duke of Buckingham's pockets instead of into the Royal Treasury.

But now Cleve was to be pardoned and the official document allowing his return to England was in Sir Harry's possession, signed by Charles I and stamped with the great seal of state.

With a frown, Sir Harry drew it forth and regarded it. He had known Cleve in England and he hadn't approved. For one thing, Cleve was a talent-waster; a man who considered life a game. He had a fine mind, yet he was entirely willing to squander his ability and enjoy himself. To Sir Harry that bordered on the criminal. Winthrop himself had but a single talent—a determination to prevail over an innate lack of competence.

But it had carried him from a merchantman's quarter-deck to knighthood, and if this Venetian mission came off, there was an excellent chance of a peerage. Not bad! He shrugged and returned the document to its place.

He steepled his fingers and stared over their tips at the great clock in the corner. Twenty minutes gone! Did Richelieu consider himself an unapproachable deity that he could keep a representative of Britain waiting?

He felt suddenly and violently urged to go and kick open the door. But he refrained. Another minute crawled away. Then the oaken partition swung inward and his guide reentered the foyer.

"*Monseigneur le Cardinal* will grant you ten minutes, *monsieur*."

THE Cardinal's library was a high-ceilinged room; spacious, yet heavy with carpets and furnishings. Except for patterned shafts of sunlight cast through latticed windows, it lay dim in shadow. At the far end, behind a huge mahogany desk, sat Richelieu, a ribbon of light streaming over one shoulder.

The Cardinal's scarlet robe was brilliant beneath the gold cascade. He was talking in soft tones to a huge monk to whom he gave a heavy folio and dismissed as Sir Harry approached.

The interview began. Cleve's pardon was presented, inspected silently, and returned. Then the Cardinal, frowning slightly, relaxed against his chair.

"Unfortunately, *monsieur*, you are late. Lord Cleve is no longer in my service. It was necessary to discharge him a week ago."

Sir Harry nodded absently. He found himself pondering how so frail appearing a man could control the destinies of France. Richelieu's thin face was delicately chiseled, aristocratic, almost ethereal; although now, the sunlight reflected from the desk-surface lent it a bright vitality.

Then the import of the Cardinal's statement struck Sir Harry and he frowned. He disliked having his time wasted, much less his patience, and yet his strong sense of duty prevented capitulation without a semblance of effort.

"Perchance Your Eminence has some information concerning Cleve's whereabouts," he suggested

"I fear not. But I can vouch that he is not in Paris, *monsieur*. That young rakehelly's penchant for trouble usu-

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ally advertises his presence, and to date my city has been quite peaceful."

There had been dry humor in that statement, but to Sir Harry it only inferred that Richard Cleve hadn't changed. He rolled the pardon into a cylinder and thrust it into his sash.

"I regret this intrusion, Your Eminence," he apologized.

Richelieu's dark eyes glittered with irony for a moment, and then they were enigmatic again. He lifted tapering fingers to the gold medallion on his chest and stood up, not a tall man, but seemingly so because of the sweep of his robe.

"You might try the English ambassador," he suggested.

Sir Harry shook his head. "The English ambassador directed me to you, *monseigneur.*" He hesitated. "No. M'Lord Cleve shall have to do without his reprieve for the present. Finding him was not my chief duty anyway."

With a stiff bow, he thanked the prelate for his time and withdrew. Outside he paused. Logically the next move would be to re-visit the English ambassador and have him seek out the exile, but as it would necessitate two hours' delay, he decided against it. He had wasted enough time. Besides, he would repass through Paris next month and could as easily locate Cleve then as now—and with more leisure.

"No by Gad! Cleve may well pay for my inconvenience." And he climbed into the swaying confines of his coach. He leaned from the window and addressed the postillion. "We are leaving Paris, Jacob. Find the road to Troyes. Be off!"

BEHIND in the library, Richelieu stood thoughtfully by his desk listening as the silver-faced clock on the mantle chimed ten. At length he sat down and stared

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across the intervening space at Père Joseph, a cassocked figure bending over a small table in the corner.

"And so, Joseph," he said. "Lord Cleve shall remain in my service by virtue of a lie." His fingers traced the brocade of the pen-pad. "I wonder if I have done wisely?"

Joseph closed the folio he had been scanning and stood up. Contrasting sharply with Richelieu, he was a stocky man, full-bellied and bearded. He had eyes of soft brown, deep in his head beneath bushy russet brows. His nose was lumpish. Yet there was a vivaciousness about his ugliness, and a sense of deep intelligence, which made understandable his position as sole confidant to Richelieu. He had little use for Cleve, or for that other young scamp, le Comte d'Entreville.

"As I see it, *monseigneur,*" he replied, "you have relieved England of a peer to give France a rogue!"

The Cardinal smiled thinly at that. "Precisely. But a most resourceful rogue, Joseph. Incidentally you might have Capitaine Cordeau place him under restraint until we are assured that Winthrop has left Paris. It would not do to have him discover that Cleve still serves me."

Pere Joseph frowned. "But Cleve is not in Paris, *monseigneur.*"

"Not in—" The Cardinal stiffened. "Peste! If that insubordinate scoundrel has—"

"He hasn't, *monseigneur.* He and the other one, d'Entreville, are now in Metz under your orders."

For a moment the Cardinal appeared nonplussed; and then he frowned. "Metz? I gave no such orders, Joseph."

The Capuchin sighed patiently and folded hands over his paunch. "Last week, *monseigneur,* you commanded an Austrian agent, Baron Von Erla, to leave France. A matter of unprovable espionage, if you will remember. To make certain that he obeyed your order, I was told to select two alert Guardsmen as escorts. As the Baron is a clever rogue, I gave him cleverer rogues as guards. Cleve and d'Entreville, *monseigneur.*"

Richelieu remembered it now, but he didn't look pleased. "Did you have to send them both to Metz?"

The monk shrugged. "You have said yourself that one is worthless without the other. I sent both."

"Then recall both. I need Cleve's cunning and d'Entreville's sword."

"Oui, monseigneur."

Joseph left to arrange for a Metz-minded carrier pigeon.

CHAPTER II

NET FOR THE KITTEN

NOW Calais is some two hundred and thirty miles distant from Metz. It borders the sea instead of the Moselle; and on the day in question, it lay somnolent in the noon glare, its harbor a-clutter with shipping so motionless as to seem painted there.

Capitan Laredos, pacing the weather-worn planking of his quarterdeck, cursed the calm with all the fire of his Spanish heart. His vessel, a dainty brig named *Donna Isabella,* sat high—too damned high for a ship due to leave port. But then, she had arrived in the same condition, empty as a result of his ambitious attempt to bring lemons up from Spain. The fruit had been dumped, a mass of putrefaction, into the sea. And now, with a cargo waiting at Cadiz, he was being held by the same sort of tranquility that had allowed his lemons to rot.

He ceased pacing and took a position by the taffrail, to stare askance at the end of the quay.

Threading his way leisurely through the loafers and cluttered ship's gear, came a stranger. A slim-waisted, rakishly clad stranger, who out of deference to the heat, wore a shirt open at the throat and thigh-high Cordovan boots turned down from the calf. The fellow's white-plumed hat was cuffed negligently at a tilt on his chestnut head, and his short, white-crossed military cape was draped carelessly from one broad shoulder. The cape covered the hilt of a long, black-sheathed rapier. He was dashing, gallant spectacle, but to little Miguel Laredos he was a portent of trouble.

THE newcomer was a soldier—apparently an officer in the Cardinal's Guard; and from long experience in all forms of maritime illegality, from smuggling to petty piracy, Miguel Laredos had developed an inherent distrust of officialdom. He started down the break in the poop, intent upon reaching his cabin and seclusion, but he was too late. The newcomer intercepted him.

"One moment, Captain. I would a word with you."

Laredos licked his lips and nodded. *"Si, señor?"*

"I have been told that you are planning to sail for Cadiz tonight, Captain."

"Si. If there is a wind."

The cavalier looked across the harbor and smiled. "Sounds reasonable," he conceded and fumbled in the cuff of his right gauntlet. He produced a rumpled but official looking document, spotted with seals and ribbons. Laredos gulped. This was it—an arrest!

"Dios arriba, señor!" he exploded. "I did not do it! You have the wrong man!"

"Think so?"

Laredos drew up righteously. "I know, *señor!"*

The Guardsman looked up from the document; cocked an eyebrow. "Damme. I don't think you know either. As a mater of fact, this paper is the deportation order for one Baron Von Erla. I have been told to see that he leaves France. He's not a vicious lad really, just naughty. Has a habit of prying, you know—gossip-monger in a political sense. I have been wondering if you would be kind enough to tender him a cabin until you reach Spain—under orders of the French Crown, of course."

"Si, señor. Si! But, of course." There was great relief in the captain's voice.

The other caught it and smiled. "Fine. Thought you'd see it that way, m'lad. The baron will be delivered in two hours. And now, good afternoon."

Laredos nodded. He didn't say anything. He found himself trying to place the speaker. Somewhere in the past he had known a man . . .

And then he caught it. Five years ago, as mate on a small Spanish lugger, he had stood off Portsmouth of a fog-cursed evening, to pick up an English noble going into exile. That nobleman had been—

"Dios!" He exclaimed. "Lord Cleve!"

BUT Cleve was past the end of the gang-plank and strolling along the crowded quay out of ear-shot. He was busy weighing, for the fiftieth time, the practicability of returning immediately to Paris, or idling a week or so along the coast in an improptu holiday. D'Entreville was against the latter alternative. But then Guy had an unhealthy tendency to be duty-struck, anyway.

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The street paralleled the harbor, running south along its edge like a ragged hem-ribbon. It was a conglomeration of noise, fish-stink and listless traffic. Cleve's throat felt cottony and little rivulets of perspiration glistened on his bronzed forehead.

By Jupiter, he decided, a tankard of ale would not go amiss now, and he knew where to get it. He and Guy had put up with their captive at a little inn known as Le Bateau d'Or, and it excelled in full-bodied, nut-brown ale imported from England.

Then rounding the corner, he came upon a small crowd in front of the tavern. A curious, staring crowd, gathered before the tavern's door, pointing and talking excitedly. He frowned, knowing that Le Bateau d'Or was not a place to attract attention. It was small and frequented chiefly by fishermen.

He hitched up his rapier and moved forward as the unmistakable sounds of war assailed his ears. There was hoarse cursing, and the clash of blades. He sighed and collared an urchin.

"What's brewing, laddie?"

The boy squirmed free. "Fight, *monsieur.*"

From the interior of the inn somebody was beginning to yowl curses concerning a slashed nose.

"Sangodemi!" a tenor voice shouted. "Perchance next time you'll not be in a heat to thrust that nose into the King's business!"

Cleve nodded. That was d'Entreville. The Frenchman had been left in charge of Von Erla. Something had gone amiss.

THEN suddenly a gentleman appeared in the tavern-door. A lean, fox-faced gentleman with flinty blue eyes, a mustache and blond hair. His pearl-studded green doublet, his wide-brimmed hat and his embroidered cape were worn with a courtier's grace, but the sword-sheath at his side was empty and his laced collar was turned askew. He paused a moment, and then began striding rapidly southward. Cleve shook his head.

"Uh-uh." He intercepted him. "Damme! Fancy bumping into you, Von Erla. Going anywhere in particular?"

The Austrian didn't turn. He stiffened as though doused with cold water. For a moment he seemed prepared to make a break for it, and then he saw the laughing dare in Cleve's eyes and relaxed. A week with the Englishman had proven enlightning and disheartening. The more personable Cleve's manner, the more dangerous he became. Von Erla shrugged.

"No place in particular, my friend."

Cleve nodded understandingly. "I see. Suppose we return to the tavern." He gestured. "After you, *chéri.*"

The baron smiled politely, but only with his lips. His eyes were chill.

The interior of Le Bateau d'Or proved to be in bad shape. Tables overturned, shattered dishes, a dozen pewter tankards scattered on the floor. But the room was silent, apparently empty. Cleve frowned slightly and stared.

Then from behind a toppled table appeared a head. It was the bald, glistening head, the terrified face of Janard, the innkeeper. Cleve regarded him sharply.

Janard was incapable of more than four words. He used them and jerked a pudgy thumb toward the rear. "They went that way."

"Thanks." Cleve turned to Von Erla. "All right, bucko. How did you arrange it?"

The Austrian shrugged. "Last evening at dinner I saw a man whom I had used once in Paris. As we passed his table I slipped him a note promising him ten livres if he'd collect a few friends and rid me of your company."

"Neat," Cleve nodded. "Very neat." He gripped Von Erla's arm. "Let's proceed."

There was a closet near the entrance to the kitchen. He ushered Von Erla into it and rammed home the bolt. He drew his blade and strolled leisurely through the kitchen toward the rear, whistling softly as he walked.

STEPPING out into the quay behind the tavern, he came upon a glinting scene of swordplay. Four hirelings were busily attacking a tall, maroon-clad cavalier who met all blades with quick parries and lightning ripostes. Cleve eyed the combat, found a three-legged stool, and sat down.

"Not bad, Kitten. But rather conceited of you to take on four at a time."

The man in maroon countered a thrust in *sixte* and darted a glance at the speaker. He frowned and snapped: *"Sangodemi!* Don't sit there, you English lout! Do something! Von Erla staged this for escape. Catch him!"

Cleve nodded. "I did. He's in the broom closet."

"Huh?" D'Entreville straightened.

"Faith, Guy! Heed your business!"

Cleve leaped to his feet and sent his stool skidding across the dock into the legs of the bravo who had succeeded in flanking d'Entreville. The fellow tried to hurdle, missed and fell flat on his face. Cleve sighed.

"Pure carelessness, Kitten."

Guy d'Entreville's lips tightened. They were thin lips, almost severe. He was dark-eyed, a good two inches taller than Cleve, with hair like rippled pitch, a clipped military spade-beard and an aristocratic nose so high-bridged as to set a hawkish cast to his features. Now he pirouetted to avoid a vicious lunge; countered swiftly to drive the lunger back. He swept aside the jabbing blades of two others with one furious parry. But the fourth man, fast recovering from contact with Cleve's stool, jumped to his feet and his steel licked a cut in d'Entreville's forearm.

At that, Cleve straightened.

A seine was hung for drying at the end of the dock. It slanted like a half tent from a single cable tethered to the tavern wall and running to a high pole at the quay's sea-end. Cleve regarded it thoughtfully, placed the stool directly beneath and climbed atop.

"A trifle left, Kitten," he directed.

D'Entreville wiped the sweat from his forehead and nodded. He showered savage thrusts into the faces of the four bravos, keeping them so engaged that they did not observe the Englishman's intent. They retreated before the sudden fury of his attack. The netting of the seine rippled criss-cross shadows atop their bobbing heads.

Cleve's naked blade swung in a short arc. It bit deeply into the thick cable supporting the seine, jerked free and slashed once more. The line broke, cut neatly at the base, and came piling down—down upon the startled, weaving quartet. There was a crescendo of howls.

"Net profit," he observed, sheathing his steel, "four would-be sharks." He stared. "But, damme! Where's d'Entreville?"

A writhing lump, detached by ten feet from the netted bravos, attracted Cleve's attention. The lump was wriggling furiously and futilely, pausing only to give vent to

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prodigious oaths. Cleve approached, lifted the edge of the net and chuckled.

"Four sharks and a cat-fish," he corrected. "Climb out, Kitten."

CHAPTER III

FOX IN THE CLOSET

FRIEDERICH CARL, Baron Von Erla, was not in a good humor. Besides being dark, the broom closet was stuffy, and it was crowded. He jerked the offending stench of a wet mop-head from beneath his chin and sat down.

He had known of Richelieu's deportation order almost immediately. And he hadn't worried. In fact, he had allowed himself to be arrested. Why not? The infromation he had sought in Paris had been acquired and his next field of operation lay in Savoy. Metz, as a point of egress, had suited his purpose.

But he had reckoned without Cleve and d'Entreville. If only Richelieu had assigned two reputable Guardsmen as his escorts, instead of a pair of impossible rakehellies whose main concern seemed a desire to throw cats into his most carefully conceived plans.

The reason for his presence in Calais was disgraceful. Von Erla could wax as enthusiastic over an *affair d'amour* as the next man, but not when it entailed a breach of discipline, and when it was absurd anyhow. That moonstruck fool d'Entreville . . . .

Guy had met a girl named Mary de Sarasnac at a mask ball in Paris three weeks ago and had straightway become mad. He hadn't seen her since, but at the time she had told him that she lived in Calais; she had given her name and a kiss, and disappeared, leaving Guy with a passionate desire to visit the northwestern part of the country. The baron had learned all this from subsequent conversations between Cleve and the romantic d'Entreville.

Von Erla shifted his seat to wider-based pail which he had gropingly inverted for the purpose. He frowned into the darkness. Because of Mary de Sarasnac, he was now seated in a small broom closet in Calais. Even d'Entreville had not benefited by this outrageous expedition. Apparently, the girl had been playing the coquette, for her address had been a bogus one and d'Entreville had soon learned that no beauty answering the name of Mary de Sarasnac had ever lived in Calais.

Von Erla would remember her name with distaste for as long as he lived. She had wrecked his reputation for efficiency. According to instructions from Vienna, he was supposed to be in Savoy, coercing its fat duke into an Austrian alliance against France. He was supposed to be there now!

HE LIFTED one foot through the dark and placed it carefully against the closet door. He twisted and placed a hand against the wall behind, and then he began to press against the panels.

It didn't work. He lifted his other foot, arched his back and tried again. He held his breath and strained against the black partition. And then somebody opened the door and he shot out of the closet like a cork from a bottle.

"Himmelherrgottkreusmillionen!"

Cleve and d'Entreville were there, flanking him on either side.

"Pecaire!" the Frenchman said. "I'll wager he can't repeat it."

Cleve regarded the prostrate baron, mild reproof in his eyes and said. "Damme! You must haven been in a fearful hurry." Then he turned to d'Entreville. "I'll take that wager."

But Von Erla didn't trust himself to say more than: "I don't propose to serve your perverted humor further, *messieurs.*" And climbed to his feet.

Guy turned to Cleve. "He didn't repeat. Pay me."

Cleve brushed an imaginary thread from his sleeve. He looked surprised and pained. "Pay you what? I lose but we set no stakes."

"Peste! I might have known you would default. Of all the—"

"Temper, Kitten," the other reproved with a grin. He took Von Erla by the arm. "Let us leave, Baron. Your coach is without, loaded and waiting."

Von Erla's smile ill-concealed his eagerness. "We are leaving at last for Metz, eh?"

D'Entreville stepped up. He didn't like the Austrian. He took little pains to conceal it, which was typical of him. "We're leaving Calais, true enough. But not for Metz. Since Austria and Spain are in such accord these days, we are sending you to Cadiz."

The baron's smile stiffened. Cadiz! He didn't want to go to Cadiz! It added nearly three weeks to his already strained schedule. Not Cadiz!

"Donner und Blitzen!" he exclaimed. "You cannot do this! You were ordered to place me outside of France at Metz. Gentlemen, I insist that you obey orders."

"Very well," Cleve soothed. "But some other time."

But the bid for harmony was wasted. At the dock, Von Erla was coldly venomous in his objections to embarkation. Guy took it as long as his patience lasted, and then offered the Austrian the alternative of silencing himself, or having it done for him—with the point of a sword. The baron accepted the former, though sullenly, and the last they saw of him was his hard, fox-like features framed in the afterport of his cabin, lips moving in silent curses.

UPON disposal of the coach, the two gallants stood in the bailey of the royal fort and battled over whether or not they should return at once to Paris. Guy wanted to hasten back immediately. He was having qualms over his flagrant breach of discipline.

But Cleve felt otherwise. "Faith! We've come this far, Kitten. If we are to roast, it may as well be for sheep as for lambs."

Guy frowned. The quiet, reckless philosophy of that statement was characteristic of Cleve. A sort of damned-to-the-consequence attitude, assumed casually and maintained as if its author was ironically amused by his own willingness to invite trouble for the interest of its solution.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Guy snapped. "There'll be no roasting if we return immediately. Richelieu will not be the wiser." He started away. "Come along, *mon ami.*"

"To Paris?"

"Yes."

Cleve turned to an officer idling a few paces away and nodded. The man smiled and stepped forward.

"Your pardon, *messieurs.* I have been given to understand that one of you is le Comte d'Entreville."

Guy paused. "That's right," he said.

The man bowed and produced a fold of paper. "I am

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Philip Chaumont, *monsieur*. My cousin has entreated me to deliver this note to you."

"*Oui?* Who is your cousin?"

"Mary de Sarasnac, *monsieur*."

"Mary de Saras— Parbleu!" The cavalier accepted the envelope with snatching fingers. Tearing it open, he muttered a hurried apology and buried his eyes in the contents.

Cleve stared innocently at the lazily stirring lily-banner over the portcullis, grinned and withdrew a pace with the officer. A slip of paper passed furtively between them.

"Your gambling note for two hundred livres, m'lad."

"*Merci.* But if you hadn't had such infernal fortune with the dice last night, I never would have considered this. Playing pranks on the Cardinal's Kitten isn't healthy."

CHAPTER IV

TIGHT LITTLE ISLE

AN HOUR found the port of Calais a small lump on the sky-rim behind them. They were riding leisurely southward down the winding shore road leading toward Cap Griz Nez and Boulogne. On one side of them, glinting in the afternoon sun, lay the Straits of Dover, and to their left were the flat, sand-gritted levels of northwestern France. Except for a group of fishermen repairing netting on the beach, the scene was almost desolate.

"Peculiar way to go to Paris," Cleve observed. He spurred alongside so that they rode knee to knee.

D'Entreville didn't answer immediately. He scowled and began to construct an evasion. Capitulation to Cleve's holiday suggestion would be difficult to stomach, and yet it had to be done if her precious note was to be honored.

Finally he said: "I've been considering, *mon ami. Sandiou!* We were becoming jaded in Paris. The summer heat and the stench caused by it from street refuse, the constant brawling and intrigue. Bad for the health, *mon ami. Oui,* very bad. What we need is fresh air, a change of scenery and perhaps—"

Cleve nodded wisely. "Faith! Even the court leaves Paris during the summer, Kitten." He rolled back in the saddle and cuffed his plumed hat aslant over one eye and chuckled. "Now what's the true reason?"

Guy sighed. "Oh well." He shrugged. "Mary de Sarasnac is visiting in Boulogne." Then, more quickly. "Having her so near justifies further detour."

Cleve grinned complacently. "That's the way I thought of it," he said and patted himself on the shoulder.

They followed the shore road for an hour. Then a trim wayside tavern, gay with its red roof and green shutters, appeared in the distance atop a low promontory overlooking the sea. They put up at it and Cleve left to see about fresh horses. Guy headed doorward intent upon ordering their supper.

THE tavern's interior was neat and confined to utilitarian furnishings. Shelves laden with pewter tankards; plates and trays lined the walls. A great stone hearth, wherein a suckling pig was stretched, spitted and sizzling, occupied the furthest end. A small table in a window alcove attracted Guy's attention and he settled himself behind it to wait for the landlord. Then he bethought himself of his letter.

He carefully drew it forth and opened it. There it was! Couched in her own hand. An apology for the trouble she had caused him in a moment of perverse merriment, and an invitation to visit her at her uncle's estate near Boulogne.

He regarded the paper dreamy-eyed, and then grew suspicious. Since when did a woman write from Boulogne on the stationery of the military governor of Calais? How could she? . . . The answer loomed quickly. She couldn't!

"Something's rotten," he murmured softly, and repeated: "*Corbac!* Something's very rotten!"

He balled the forgery in his fist and started for the door with long strides. He met the stableman entering, and only because the fellow had nimble feet was a violent collision prevented. Guy looked at him.

"Where is that viper? That two faced, double-dealing jackanapes, that lying—"

The stableman was nonplussed. "Viper, *monsieur?* You mean the gentleman with whom you arrived?"

"*Sangodemi!* He's no gentleman, but I came with him true enough. Where is he?"

"Down by the sea-wall, *monsieur*."

Guy thanked him and strode on. In his mind there was not the slightest doubt that the forgery was Cleve's work. He had been with the English rakehelly too long not to recognize this species of duplicity. The spirited banter which had always characterized their friendship was all right in its place, but this latest of Cleve's jokes touched upon a serious, yes, a sacred matter. Thudding over the turf of the inn's after-yard, he wondered what he was going to do, and hoped that it was something horrible.

THE grey sea-wall formed a semi-crescent along the waterfront, punctuated at distinct intervals by twenty-foot appletrees. It was about sixteen rods in length with the soft cross-chop of the Straits lapping eagerly at its base.

Seated at the furthermost end, with his booted legs dangling, was Cleve. He had taken his hat off and his rapier lay across it on the wall beside him. He was staring intently across the water toward a thin dark line atop the western horizon. Guy made a lot of noise stumping up from behind, but Cleve didn't turn. The Frenchman paused and gnawed his lip, trying to think of something biting to start with. But he couldn't, and decided to build up to it gradually.

"They say you can see England from here," he said.

Cleve nodded slowly. "You can. And it seems very near. Twenty-one miles is near, isn't it?"

Something about his tone caused Guy to stare. He had never heard Cleve speak that way before. Cleve was ironic, pleasantly cynical, bantering—never wistful. No matter what his feelings, he had always kept them bottled tight.

"*Oui.* It is very near," Guy said.

"It's the first sight of England I've had in long time."

Guy shifted uneasily. He suddenly felt that he was seeing the true stature of his friend for the first time and the feeling that accompanied it made him uncertain. He wasn't sure that he wanted to.

"A tight little isle, England," Cleve said slowly after a moment. "No. Perchance, *smug* would be a better word. Smug in its acceptance of a government whose corrupt practices are conveniently ignored. Revelation of graft amongst the august members of the royal entourage is simply not tolerated."

He laughed a trifle. He was remembering himself as the young outspoken member of the House of Lords, newly arrived at St. James five years ago. That rash hot-head from Wykeham, crusading for right unwittingly, recklessly, because it seemed sporting; and then being stung by the

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Royal Master whom he had only striven to serve. It had hurt then, but now the bitterness was gone, replaced by a strange new indifference.

He stared hard at that long smudged line on the sea-rim. He didn't seem conscious of what he said. "Yes. A tight little island, England. But if you've ever seen the soft green of the rolling countryside, the neat little cottages, the proud look in the eyes of the people, you forget the smugness, the—"

Suddenly he stopped, a flush of self-consciousness touching his features. He laughed shortly. "Faith! I should have brought my violin. Shall we go to supper, Kitten?"

Guy nodded. Somehow the earthy emotion of homesickness did not belong to the Richard Cleve whom he knew. But he had seen the truth now. He stared down at the balled letter in his hand, then shrugged and pitched it over the wall into the sea. His eyes swept the horizon and suddenly he frowned.

"*Sandiou,* Cleve! Here comes our Spanish brig with Von Erla aboard."

It was the *Donna Isabella,* true enough; coming from the north with the sagging billows of her sail tugging her slowly down the Channel. There could be no mistake. The yellow-trimmed sides and the sloped poop would identify her anywhere. Cleve smiled.

"I wonder if Von Erla is enjoying the sea? Come along, Kitten. We'll drink him a toast for the De'il of it."

And a few minutes later, as they put the suggestion into action, they little realized what sort of toast was being drunk in the captain's cabin of the *Donna Isabella.*

. . . The baron said: "To Le Havre," emptied his glass and swept a gold-crammed leather sack across the table. "For landing me there at dawn, *capitan,* I pay half now—the rest when our bargain is complete."

In the saffron of the cabin's wall-lanterns, the little Spaniard's face wrinkled with pleasure. "Ah. But this *is* a profitable voyage after all, *señor.*"

"For both of us," Von Erla nodded and stood up. "You make money. And I make my way to Savoy in half the time I had expected. And so, good fortune to us both."

CHAPTER V

THE CARDINAL'S LASH

RICHELIEU'S tone was cutting, with a controlled fury behind it. He sat in the vaulted confines of the palace library and stared at Guy d'Entreville standing quite alone on the other side of the polished desk surface.

Guy shifted from one foot to the other. The Cardinal's calm voice came at him with a bite that was worse than corporal punishment. These soft, deliberate sentences were more painful than a lashing. Guy regretted bitterly the two weeks he and Cleve had stolen and wondered enviously where the Englishman was now.

"Insubordinate men are dangerous," Richelieu was saying. "More dangerous than traitors. You and M. Cleve were ordered to deliver le Baron Von Erla at the City of Metz. Instead, you deport him from Calais; then disappear on one of your rakehelly escapades for half a month. Most commendable, *monsieur le comte.* And, speaking of Cleve, where is that loyal Guardsman now? When I spoke to you last night, I ordered *both* of you to appear before me this morning."

"*Oui, monseigneur,*" Guy agreed. "I have not seen M. Cleve this morning."

Richelieu nodded sarcastically. "I presume that is fortunate. Had you seen him, perchance neither of you would have arrived!"

He fell back in his chair, frowning and absently tugging at the gold medallion on his chest. For a moment the huge library was cloaked in heavy oppressive stillness.

"I have been miraculously patient with you two rogues," the Cardinal said finally. "*Ma foi!* I have been accused of becoming soft. But I have not become soft! In these troubled times, with France filled with nobles who insist upon their outmoded feudal privileges of private armies and personal kingdoms, I need resourceful men. Men who will aid me to build the nation into a great power, united under but one government—the King's. You and Cleve are rascals, *monsieur*—irresponsible, impudent and disobedient. But you have the courage and resource I need. I pay for it with patience. *Comprenez?*"

"*Oui, monseigneur.*"

"Good. I am therefore reducing you to cornets in my Guard with the attendant cut in wage. A light punishment, really, for I *had* considered three months in La Bastille and dismissal. If trouble had not developed in the Duchy of Montferrat, that is what would have happened."

GUY let the tight breath in his chest ease out relievedly. *Sandiou!* That had been close! He didn't care to dwell on the possibilities. "Trouble in Montferrat, *monseigneur?*" he asked.

Richelieu nodded. He arose and paced slowly to a huge map of France emblazoned upon the rear wall. For an instant a shaft of light from the corner window swept the Cardinal's shadow sharply across the map. Then Richelieu turned.

"Your sword, *monsieur.*"

Guy drew his blade and extended it hilt first. The Cardinal took the weapon. He used it as a pointer.

"Montferrat," he said, placing the steel tip on a small section, shaped like an hour glass, that lay squeezed between the Duchies of Savoy and Milan. "Montferrat is a vital buffer-state, *monsieur.*"

Buffer-state? Guy regarded the map more closely. The whole width of the independent Duchy of Savoy separated Montferrat from the French Alpine border in northern Italy. Richelieu apparently read his thought.

"Perhaps out-post would be a better word, *monsieur.* Montferrat is a vital out-post, and for the mission you are about to undertake it is imperative that you fully understand why." He lifted the sword-point. "It is bounded on the north and west by Savoy; on the east by Milan; on the south by Piedmont. Virtually an island, *monsieur.* A French island in the center of the alps."

He turned. "I point this out for but one reason. Montferrat is surrounded by enemies, each of whom would like to gain possession of it. The Duchy of Milan is dominated by Spain and heavily garrisoned with her troops. Piedmont is dominated by Austria in the same manner. Needless to say, both Spain and Austria are allied and anxious to crush France. They would launch an invasion of Dauphine and south-eastern France in an instant, if it weren't for our strong protectorate, the Duchy of Montferrat."

Guy frowned. "But how can a little principality like Montferrat prevent—"

"I shall explain," Richelieu told him crisply and shifted

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the sword again. "You will note that no invasion from either Milan or Piedmont can take place unless the Duchy of Savoy is crossed, and because of our large garrison in Montferrat, the duke of that country does not dare permit his territory to be used as a bridge for an invading army. As long as we hold Montferrat, Savoy must remain a friend. We have armies on both sides of her, you see."

Guy nodded. "In other words, *monseigneur,* to prevent an Austro-Spanish invasion from Milan or Piedmont, France must keep Savoy from forming an alliance with them. And in order to guarantee Savoy's neutrality, the Duchy of Montferrat must needs remain in French hands."

THE prelate lowered the rapier and turned. He smiled. "Precisely, *monsieur,*" he said. "Montferrat keeps plans of Spanish aggression in suspense and leaves the cunning Duke of Savoy no alternative except to be outwardly amiable to the French Crown. Of course, he isn't. If Montferrat were in his hands, he'd be able to threaten France with an Austrian alliance and win for himself inestimable power. But that is neither here nor there. Montferrat is the key to our defense."

"And the trouble?"

"The usual thing!" the Cardinal snapped and paced back to the desk. "Traitors and gold!"

He picked up a sheet of foolscap and examined it savagely. *"Ma foi!* It's more serious than invasion. A treaty with Savoy allows us to ship money over the Susa Road for the maintenance of our garrison in Montferrat, and now thrice within two months the gold-train has been looted! Looted in Montferrat, mind—else I'd know whom to blame. Without pay our troops grow restive, almost mutinous. Desertions are beginning to take place."

Guy nodded. Being a soldier he could understand that. Armies in that day consisted of mercenaries, hastily levied and recognizing no patriotism except that based upon a gold standard. To deprive them of their wages for long meant mutiny.

"Obviously, the duchy is a hot-bed of intrigue," Richelieu continued. "I can read the signs. Not only do the robbers know when to expect our shipments, but the routes, the amount and the number of guards.

"Duke Vincent of Montferrat speaks of treason—treason among his own advisors—unprovable suspicions and apprehensions. Colonel le Viscomte de Boussey, my *commandant* of the garrison, has twice been fired on from ambush. He blames Henri, Duke Vincent's son—but without proof."

He lifted frowning eyes to Guy. "I have already sent men to Montferrat to ascertain the trouble, *monsieur.* They have never returned and the highly organized robberies continue. Another two months of it and Montferrat will fall prey to any power who desires to take her. France cannot afford that. I am still in ignorance of what lurks beneath the surface, but I intend to find out. And immediately!"

"I understand, *monseigneur,*" Guy said quietly.

The Cardinal smiled. "I thought you would," he said.

CHAPTER VI

SWORD IN FLIGHT

IT WAS then that Richard Cleve walked into the room. Cordeau, rotund *capitaine* of the Guard, waddled after him, protesting vigorously. Cleve had no business bursting into Richelieu's privacy without announcement. *Corbac!* He would suffer for this flagrant breach of Palace etiquette—this deliberate insolence . . .

Cleve turned. He smiled tightly and said two words in an easy voice: "Keep quiet!"

Cordeau opened his beard-fringed mouth to protest, thought better of it, and obeyed.

From his place by the map, Guy bit his lip. The signs were there: the cold amiability, the leisurely stride, the soft voice. He felt a chill of apprehension as he realized that Cleve was primed for trouble.

Richelieu waited until the English gallant had reached the desk, his thin face mask-like. Then he said flatly: "Quite typical,*monsieur.* Rude, insolent and tardy. Now suppose you explain yourself!"

Cleve tucked the wide brim of his plumed hat beneath one arm and bowed. He was dressed for travel in his favorite costume: stained and worn Cordovan boots that reached to the thighs, black velvet breeches and a gold sash which held the ebon of his silver-slashed doublet close to his waist. He cocked an eyebrow.

"I'll be glad to explain myself, *monseigneur.* But after you have explained yourself."

Guy gulped. *Sangodemi!* A deliberate bait! What was the fool trying to do? Execute himself? He looked quickly at Richelieu to see how the Cardinal was taking it. The Cardinal's face hadn't changed much except to go white. He sat down.

He said icily: *"Monsieur,* perhaps you forget to whom you are speaking."

Something seemed to be prodding Cleve into complete madness. "On the contrary, *monseigneur.*"

Richelieu regarded him sharply. "I have been given the to fondle the medallion on his chest. Guy shifted uneasily. When Richelieu did that he was dangerous.

"I see," the Cardinal said.

"Oh, but I doubt that you do, *monseigneur!*"

Guy couldn't stand by while Cleve literally talked his head off. Men who crossed the Cardinal usually had that happen—after a short trial, of course. The French cavalier swung around the corner of Richelieu's great desk.

"You must pardon, Cleve, *monseigneur.* He is still suffering from an old head wound received a year ago in your service. Even this morning he was delirious."

Richelieu regarded him sharply. "I have been given the impression that you did not see Monsieur Cleve this morning, d'Entreville."

"And he didn't," Cleve interposed. He looked at Guy and smiled, but his eyes were hard. "Thanks, Kitten. But this is my affair."

THEN he returned to the Cardinal. "I had a most interesting breakfast talk with my friend the English ambassador this morning, *monseigneur.* He told me about Sir Harry Winthrop's visit to Paris and the reason for it."

"Am I to assume that is the reason for your tardiness?"

"No," the other denied softly. "No, *monseigneur.* Père Joseph had a bit to do with that. He intercepted me as I arrived. A kindly soul, Joseph." His tones were acid. "He didn't care to have you embarrassed when I asked for my pardon."

Richelieu took a deep breath. "I see," he said.

Whether Cleve recognized the peril of that deep breath, Guy didn't know. The Englishman pinched the end of his nose and continued:

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"Excellent, *monseigneur*. Joseph explained how you duped Sir Harry into a belief that I no longer served you. A neatly put explanation too. Something to do with the welfare of France. But, *monseigneur,* when the welfare of France interferes with my—"

Then the fury of Richelieu lashed into words. *"Monsieur!"* he roared. "I've heard enough!" He rose and the thud of his fist upon the desk-top punctuated the command.

But Cleve didn't hold his tongue. Richelieu's loss of control seemed to give him new insolence. "And so have I, *monseigneur*. We are quits! A man who would betray my future for his interests might some day find it to his interests to betray my life. Consider my resignation effective as of today. Once bitten, twice shy you know. Adieu!"

He turned and started toward the door The Cardinal was waxen white. He lunged across the desk, one finger jabbing toward Cleve's back.

"Cordeau! Arrest that man! If he resists, cut him down!"

"Oui."

Cordeau bit his lip and stepped manfully in front of Cleve. "Er—you are under arrest, *monsieur*."

He started to draw his blade and succeeded partially. Then he was siting on the floor and Cleve was stepping over him, gently massaging the knuckles that had struck the blow. Richelieu jerked angrily on the silken bell-cord behind his desk. Immediately, the halbardiers outside burst into the library, glinting weapons held ready. Cordeau sat up blinking the library back into focus.

"Sandiou! What happened?"

NOBODY heard him. Cleve grappled with the nearest of the halbardiers; snatched the fellow's halbard-point in gloved fingers and jerked. The weapon slid free, and its owner grunted in amazement. But his comrade was quicker and backed away to bring his halbard to point.

The English rakehelly had been expecting this. He whirled, the captured halbard locked firmly in his grip, and caught the second guard behind the ear with its swinging butt. The man slumped.

Then the first guard snapped out of his lethargy. He dove recklessly for Cleve's throat. Cleve was acting entirely on impulse. Desperately. He saw the man's arching body, ducked suddenly, butted upward and caught his attacker on the point of the jaw. The man went down and Cleve's head rang. He felt like sitting down himself.

But somehow he managed to turn without falling on his face, his long blade flashing. Cordeau was rubbing his jaw and staring absently into space. The Cardinal glared at Guy.

"You're still in my service, *monsieur*. Do your duty!"

Guy shook himself. None of this seemed real. There was nothing he could do to prevent it. He had stood rooted, held by the spectacle of his friend's suicidal madness. And now Richelieu was telling him to draw!

Impossible! He could not. But it would be even more terrible to betray his pledge of loyalty to the Cardinal. He drew. Drew slowly, reluctantly, while Cleve waited, an uncertain devil's-grin on his lips. Then Guy smiled.

"Oh," he hinted. "So you're going to run, eh Cleve?"

The Englishman got it and chuckled. "All the way to Italy if need be!" He blew Richelieu a kiss and darted through the door.

It brought Cordeau out of his stupor. He arose and his fat fist swept up the silver whistle dangling from a cord around his neck. Guy tensed. One blast on that, and every guard within hearing would bar the fugitive's escape. There was only one thing to do and the French cavalier did it.

HE SHOUTED encouragingly to Richelieu: "I'll fetch him back, *monseigneur!"* then charged straight toward the unsuspecting Cordeau. The ensuing collision was quite solid and satisfactory.

Guy's sinewy frame careened into the fat man's back and they went down. Cordeau lost his whistle and his breath as well; and Guy, sprawled atop him, listened to the diminishing rhythm of Cleve's flight and grinned contentedly. All in all, it had been well executed.

But Richelieu didn't think so. He hadn't been fooled. "You shall pay for that little travesty on duty, *monsieur le comte,"* he said coldly. "Now stand up!"

Guy obeyed. Triumph died in him as he realized the consequence of his deed. Behind, Cordeau was trying to stand up, catch breath and curse at the same time. One of the halbardiers began to stir. Richelieu stared.

One of his precepts consisted of a belief in his ability to turn untoward incidents to his advantage. Whatever their crimes, Cleve and d'Entreville were still necessary in Montferrat. Therefore he would have them there. A lesser man would have despaired; Richelieu saw a way.

" 'Twill be unfortunate for France to lose you, *monsieur,"* he told d'Entreville. *"Oui.* Despite your roystering way, you have served the crown well."

"Merci, monseigneur. Cleve is but homesick and he—"

The Cardinal steepled his fingers. He was frowning. "Spare me your thanks! As a person, I demand that you pay for your crime. But—" He paused. "But fortunately, *monsieur,* fortunately for you, I'm not a person. I am the Minister of France. My judgment must be impersonal, impartial, and devoted to the best interests of the State.

"It is therefore to these interests that I can offer you an alternative, *monsieur.* Bring Lord Richard Cleve back to me under arrest, and all charges against you shall be dropped. Otherwise—" The speaker shrugged.

Guy didn't need to think about that one. His reaction was immediate. He said: "Such an alternative is insulting, *monseigneur."*

"Very well. Both you and Cleve pay the traitor's fee. You to prison; he to death! Of course, had you accepted, I merely intended sending him to Montferrat. But since you haven't accepted, his death is inevitable. I suffer no illusions, d'Entreville. No man, other than yourself can take Richard Cleve alive!"

Guy couldn't keep the edge of triumph out of his voice. "You appear to forget, *monseigneur,* that Cleve has escaped!"

"For the time being," Richelieu agreed and played his trump card. "But I have three thousand carrier-pigeons. Within a day every garrison in France shall be on the alert for your friend—with orders to slay him on sight."

Guy was in agony now. The Cardinal wasn't bluffing. Cleve was a dying man, even as he rode madly after Sir Harry and his permit to go home. Guy hesitated; and then he came to the only decision possible.

"I shall find my friend and place him under arrest immediately, *monsiegneur,"* he said quietly. "I give my oath!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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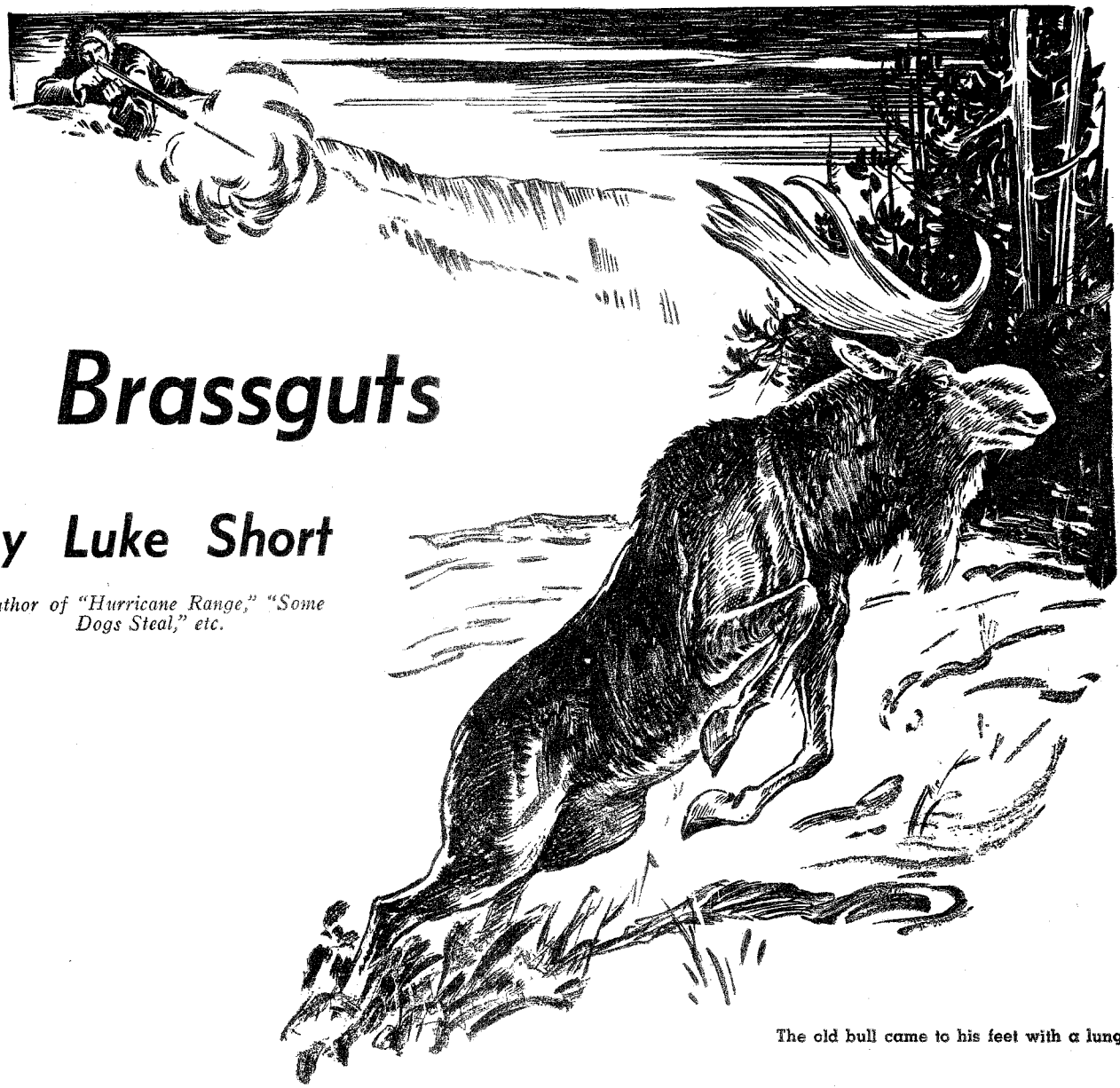

Brassguts

By Luke Short

Author of "Hurricane Range," "Some Dogs Steal," etc.

The old bull came to his feet with a lunge

The story of two men fighting each other and the savage cold, and of an old moose who alone was impregnable

THAT January, in violation of all the laws of God and the forecasts of men, it didn't snow much. But when there is no snow, there must be cold; and there was. Through still, savage days, the land lay locked in an iron grip.

There is cold when rabbits won't run, and their trails are drifted over; when they ball up in a poplar thicket and wait; when the winter chickadee doesn't even sing; when the deer and moose and caribou bed down in the thin sunlight and don't move, just wait. Everything waits, holding to life, hoarding it.

It was on one of these nights when the stars hung low, the thin quiet cold of interstellar space swinging them nearer, that Poor and Marble pulled into the main camp with their two teams. Poor was first off the river and up its bank to the clearing in front of the shack. The dogs dropped in their traces, panting furiously, and Poor sat down on the background of his toboggan exhausted, hunched, shivering.

When Marble drove up a minute later, Poor roused himself.

"Fire goin'?" Marble asked through stiff lips.

"No. I was winded."

Marble said nothing. Poor dragged himself around to the dogs. "Make fire and put some cornmeal on. I'll unhook."

Alone, leading the dogs out to their snowholes and chaining them, Poor looked bleakly up at the cold stars, cursing them. In his twenty-five bush years, he had never known a spell like this. Already, the cold had hung on a week and there was no sign of a break. In that week, he and Marble had finished the round of their south line—finished it with little grub, no meat, and next to no dogfood. The game was quiet, not moving, and when it didn't move, a man couldn't get it.

He looked down at frost-white dogs, curled in their snowholes, already starting that quavering whine which was part cold, part hunger, and all misery. Poor, a spare, lean man with bleached eyes, had learned to accept hard luck and defeat in his forty years, but he had never learned to accept it for his dogs.

He turned away to finish unharnessing. He could hear

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the fire roaring in the shack, but somehow he did not want to go in. Marble would be in there, baffled, surly, his temper hairtrigger, the way it had been for more than a week now.

"And it will be until this cold breaks," Poor thought wearily. "I don't blame him."

When Poor did get in, Marble was in bed, too tired to eat. Poor waited until the cornmeal was boiled, then fed the dogs, ashamed of the food he was giving them. Then he too went to bed, the sound of the dogs whining outside trailing him to a dreamless sleep.

FOR three days they hunted in that cold; for three days they tramped a silent frozen bush where nothing stirred, where all the tracks were old; and three nights they returned without a kill to hear that monotonous whine of misery from the dogs as they lay in their blankets.

Poor said quietly that night in the dark, "It can't last, I tell you."

"It has, hasn't it?" Marble said bitterly. His young, tough face did not relax in the dark, nor did that simmering fury of disgust abate. He was thinking, had been thinking each night at this time, that across there in the other bunk was a man who had been in the bush twenty-five years against his own five, and still could not take care of his dogs and himself. He thought that, listening to the thread-thin whine of the dogs out in the night, angry, bitter, impotent.

Next morning, the cold still held. Marble built the fire, standing there in his underwear before the stove, shivering, tired with a sleepless night of cold. He looked at the lone window frozen over solid with ice and then fuzzed again with last night's frost. Outside, in that cold just before dawn, he could hear an occasional shot-like report of a tree contracting with the frost. And when that was gone, silence—cold, cold silence. In an hour, he would be out hunting in it again.

Poor roused now, and said, "Why didn't you wake me? It was my turn on the fire."

"I couldn't sleep," Marble growled.

"The dogs?"

Marble whirled, furious. "Damn the dogs! The lousy half-starved scrubs! We got a couple hundred dollars' worth of fur out there on the north line and we'll lose it—on account of them damn dogs! Damn 'em, damn 'em!"

Poor, wise enough to accept the inevitable, said nothing, but stooped down to tie up his moccasins.

"If we'd had a decent team to begin with, we'd never of had to go through this!" Marble said hotly.

"Sure."

Marble looked down at him in quiet rage. "Well, would we?" he demanded harshly.

Poor stood up and looked calmly at his partner. "When we threw in together, I told you two teams would be a damn nuisance. You wouldn't believe me. All right, you're findin' out."

Marble said furiously, "Hell, if we'd used your dogs, we'd never got this far!"

"What's the matter with mine?" Poor asked gently. He was climbing into a pair of greasy, torn coveralls, under which he wore a ragged and patched sweater. Marble looked at his clothes with disgust.

"Matter with 'em?" he echoed. "Hell, man, look at yourself. You're held together with a sewin' kit! Your dogs are no damned good Your sled is tinned up until it ain't much more than a travelin' lard bucket! Your snowshoes are strung with string, your rifle is worse than a muzzle loader, half your traps are fixed with balin' wire, your canoe ain't any better than a water soaked raft! Everything! Everything you got, and everything you do is like that! Half-cocked! You put your sets in at the wrong time and expect fur! You bull through a winter with everything stacked against you and then you wonder why you don't make money!"

Poor's light, calm eyes looked up at his new partner. He said mildly, "You wanted to throw in with me last fall. I never asked you to."

"I know," Marble said savagely. "When open water comes, I'll fix that."

They ate a quick breakfast, saying nothing. Afterward, Poor put on a patched and ragged parkee, took a handful of shells from the wall shelf and said, "I'm going west down to the Cutbank and up it."

He went out, a plume of frost sweeping in the door as he left. Marble could hear the brittle crunch of his feet on the snow, could hear him take down his antiquated rifle from the nail outside, could hear the clatter of the snowshoes as he tucked them under his arm and started off on another day of hunting.

He looked around him and cursed impotently, then rose and went through much the same business.

OUTSIDE, air struck him with its knife-thin chill, and he could feel his nostrils getting stiff. Looking down onto the river, he could see its gray, toboggan-scarred surface, just turning into white in the light of the low sun far to the southeast. All of it, the dead motionless waiting bush, the savage cold, the thought of another day's fruitless hunting, angered him unreasonably.

Ants, waiting for the great God of nature to step on them. That's all they were. He turned where his gun hung and took it down. Beside it, on another nail, were the six-foot hunting shoes. Poor, with his customary, humble self-abnegation, had left them for him. It was as if Poor had implied, "Take them, Marble. You've been in the bush five years to my twenty-five. So you need all the breaks. Take the best gun, the best shoes, the best hunting country. I'll make out some way."

Sneering, Marble took the shoes off their hook and tucked them under his arm, and set off on the toboggan trail east that paralleled the river.

Another heartbreaking still day, a day in which a moose could hear you coming two miles off, and could see you one. Looking around him, he could see where the bush was crisscrossed with moose tracks—all two weeks old, all signifying nothing, mocking him.

Three miles down the trail, where a wide deep gut mounted up the long hill out of the river valley, Marble paused, contemplating it with a kind of quiet despair before he put on his snowshoes and started to hunt up the gut. Another day of misery.

Fifty feet off the trail, he paused abruptly and looked down at the snow. A moose track. Kneeling, he felt the crust on the track to see if it was fresh. It was.

But its size!

To Marble it looked as if the track had been made by a dishpan rammed into the snow. But in spite of his excitement, he was skeptical. He toed out of his snowshoes and went back to the trail, then traveled down it a ways, hoping to find the place where the moose crossed the trail.

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He did, and when he came to it, he just stood there, his mouth open a little.

"Good God!" he muttered, kneeling down. The track was that of a bull moose, round, blunt in the hard-packed snow of the toboggan trail. Looking at it, Marble knew that a good-sized pie tin would barely have covered the track. Here was meat, and it was close! And more of it than most men were ever to see under one hide.

Marble looked up the mounting valley. It was thick with popple trees and saplings and buckbrush, the worst kind of hunting country. But he wasn't thinking of that so much; he was thinking of Poor and how he would look when Marble went home and told him that he'd killed the biggest bull moose any man ever saw.

Marble grinned a little, his tough face excited. He didn't have the moose yet, but this was all he needed. Squatting there, he marshalled all the hard-won hunting lore he had. First testing the wind, he found there was just the slightest breeze from the east. He should have known that anyway, because his right cheek was stiff and numb from the cold. He knew that scent will travel up a valley farther than other places, so he must get out of here. The chances were, the moose was feeding up the valley, drifting toward the west, and the noisy snowshoes could go to hell.

SO HE set out. It was labor, slogging through the snow which was higher than his knees, and it hurt to breathe the cold air through his mouth. But Marble almost forgot that, so intent was he on making his circle wide enough and careful enough.

It took him one solid hour to make the mile up the hill, swinging in a wide cautious arc. Resting under a big spruce to get his breath, he thought, "I'm around him now. He's feeding slow. He's somewhere down that gut. All I've got to do is take it easy to the edge of the gut."

He set out again this time swinging east, this time more carefully than before. It was a hundred yards to the edge of the gut, and each time Marble put his foot down, he put his weight on it cautiously. A stick can crack even under a foot and a half of snow.

Slowly, slowly, he approached the edge of the gut. Almost to it, he got down on his belly and wormed his way through the snow to the rim.

Below and in front of him, the valley spread out in serene, snowy stillness, its poplars thinned now so that he could see far. His eyes first scanned the bottom of the valley, a hundred feet below him, and saw nothing. Then he moved his gaze to the side of the hill, his heart sinking. If a moose were down there, he would have seen the big black hunk of it immediately.

And then his eyes stopped, and his breath too. There, on a bald knoll just in front of the dark green of a towering spruce, was his moose. It was bedded down atop the knob, clear of trees, lying there like a monarch at ease.

Marble didn't move at first; he just watched. It was a bull, and he had already shed one horn. The other, the right, spread out and down in a grand flare to the web, and then spiked up in long blunt waxy fingers. Without knowing it, Marble ached to see the other horn, the one that was shed.

The black of his sleek coat shone in the sun, and his muscles coiled and sawed beneath the backfat as he swung his head occasionally to look around him. The great dewlap of his bell dragged in the snow and his breath flagged up and vanished about the flat, frosted Roman nose. He was regal, utterly contained, magnificent, in his massive, monumental alertness.

Marble felt himself shivering with excitement, but it was not the excitement of privilege: for to Marble, the moose was only many hundred pounds of red meat that he would kill—and that Poor wouldn't.

It was only a moment of watching, and then Marble's hunting craft came back to him. He knew if he backed away and circled far up the hill in behind the bull, there was a chance that a drift of wind would give his scent. If he were to move forward, he would be seen. If he were to go back and crawl up the gut, the bull would be hidden.

There was only one thing to do then and Marble did it.

HE DREW off his mittens and set his rear sight for a hundred yards. Then he squinched down on his belly, got comfortable and raised his gun. As he put his bare right hand on the trigger guard, he could feel the cold metal burn him savagely, and when, in pain, he changed his grip, he could feel the skin rip off where it touched the metal.

He began to shiver again now as he lined up his sights, and he had to slack off. The fingers of his left hand, bare too, had frozen to the barrel where they curled up over the wood. But Marble sighted anew. When the sights swung in line, full on the wide black chest, Marble held his breath, beginning to clench his trigger hand, and behind thought there was that pain of the metal burning him. He clamped his jaw tighter against the pain of it, just as he shot. The rifle cracked clean and sharp in the cold, and Marble leaped to his feet.

The old bull came to his feet in a lunge, stood for one alert second as he looked across the gut at Marble, then wheeled on his hind legs and crashed down the knoll toward the east and out of sight.

Marble didn't have time to shoot again, nor could he have, for he was tumbling down the side of the gut in a wild scramble to reach bottom. It took him five minutes to reach the knoll, and there he knelt, breathing furiously.

Without thinking of its size, he saw the wide deep bed of the old bull, and knelt in it. There, where the mark of the right leg was, were a few drops of blood and a scattering of hair.

Looking up beyond the spruce, Marble laughed. "I got you, old Brassguts, and I'll get you down too. You're dogfeed."

Elated, he took up the trail, slogging through the deep snow, watching the tracks. But old Brassguts wasn't limping, he saw, and he noticed very little blood on the snow. Marble made a circle, and when he picked up the tracks again, old Brassguts was going strong, headed east and down toward the river. Marble followed doggedly, circling, wondering.

Four hours later, he had followed the tracks down to the river spruce, and he saw where old Brassguts, after traveling them for two miles, was heading up the hill again.

When the sun hung low in the west and the whole river valley slipped down into cold shadow, Marble stopped and leaned against a tree, sick with exhaustion. He had to face it now. He hadn't hit Brassguts squarely, and he was gone. And back there in the shack, Poor would listen to his story and say nothing, meek, humble, blaming him, mentally calling him a fool—but saying nothing.

Wearily in the dusk, Marble hunted out the trail and started for home.

Far up on the hill toward the top of it, old Brassguts

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paused and looked around him. His lips and nose were rimmed with frost and it was getting colder. He stood motionless, puzzled, watching his back-trail, his nose a little out-thrust, nostrils pulsing, searching the near-still air for a strange scent.

Nothing strange, nothing new, only that cursed cold that had made his nose so sore today. What had happened? Something had stung his shoulder, which was now stiff, and a queer two-legged figure had jumped up from across the gut. Was there a noise? He couldn't quite remember. Certainly not a big one, for he had heard lightning make a bigger. Still, something stung his leg.

He sniffed again, watching the cold dusk settle. Then he took ten steps over to a spruce and rubbed his rump against it. The ticks were starting in again, gnawing and feeding on his hide. When he had eased the itch a bit, he stalked out from under the spruce. No smell, nothing but the cold.

He put his head down and nuzzled the snow away from some dead poplar brush, then looked up and saw some upright poplar saplings not far off.

He suddenly realized he was hungry, so he made for them, today forgotten.

POOR had supper waiting when Marble dragged in. "Didn't I hear you shoot?" Poor asked.

"You did," Marble said flatly, and shut up. He was too tired to eat. His legs ached and throbbed and his nostrils and chin were frostbitten and hurt.

Poor ate in silence, cooked up a mess of cornmeal mush for the dogs and fed them, then came in, cut shavings, stoked the fire and crawled in his bedroll. Marble had been in his for an hour, awake. He was waiting for Poor to ask him more about the shot, but Poor only stared up at the ceiling for a full five minutes, then blew the candle and turned over.

"Poor," Marble said suddenly in the dark.

"What?"

"I missed him. The biggest damn moose I ever saw. And I missed him. Aren't you goin' to give me hell?"

"Anybody misses them."

"But aren't you going to give me hell?" Marble jibed. "Come on."

Poor said nothing. Presently he was asleep and Marble cursed him aloud.

By breakfast next morning, neither of them had spoken. Poor was first up from the table and he put on his parkee again.

"You goin' after that moose?" he asked Marble.

"Hell, he's likely in Siberia by now."

"Then you ain't?"

"No."

"I am," Poor said. Marble laughed as Poor went out.

Poor took his old gun, took the same trail. When he came to Marble's tracks of yesterday, he followed them up to where Marble had left the snowshoes, then back to the trail where the moose track lay.

Like Marble, he knelt down by the track, and like Marble, he muttered, "Good God," and added to no one, "Look at that."

But he didn't pause nor follow Marble's tracks. If Marble jumped the moose, he would have jumped him to the east, which would mean the moose was upriver. And because Marble had hunted him the whole day, it indicated to Poor that the moose was still in the valley and hadn't been chased up into the muskeg. Three miles down, Poor picked up the tracks where old Brassguts had started up hill.

By noon, he had come across a recent bed showing a blood spot. The moose wouldn't be far from here. Poor slipped off his tiny trail shoes, levered a shell into his old octagon-barreled gun and set out.

He didn't hunt like Marble. He was more daring, more sure of himself, more observant. Because there was no wind, he clung to the zig-zag tracks, feeling the tips of the torn brush where old Brassguts had been feeding, testing how long it had been since he passed. He read the tracks, aimless, meandering.

Ahead of him was just the suggestion of a ridge, and he could see old Brassguts' tracks go over it. Beyond the ridge was a small valley, for he could tell that by the tree-tops beyond. Thoughtfully, Poor stooped and tested the tracks in the snow. They were fairly soft, would have been much softer if the day had not been so bitterly cold.

He looked up at the ridge again, his bleach eyes speculative. This was the warmest part of the day and old Brassguts had been feeding a good part of the morning. Therefore, the chances were old Brassguts was bedded down somewhere just across the ridge, and had been for an hour.

Slowly, Poor rose, backed off quietly headed north. He was in no hurry. He knew if he walked up to the ridge and carefully looked over it, he would see old Brassguts, would probably be close enough for a shot. But he wanted to make sure.

WHEN he had made a wide half-circle, which brought him out on the other side of the little valley, he picked his spot carefully. When old Brassguts got up, he would hit for the highest ground and look around him, Poor knew. So Poor cached himself at the base of a huge poplar which stood at the foot of a low bald ridge. He was less than twenty-five yards from the top of it.

Sitting down in the sun, Poor laid his gun across his lap and waited. It was cold, bitterly cold, but he clenched his hands inside his mittens and wiggled his toes inside his moccasins—and sat there, motionless.

He did not know how long he waited; he only knew that he would have to let Brassguts get mighty close if he was to get him with his old wornout thirty-thirty. Poor was thinking of that new, remade thirty-two special of Marble's hanging on its nail in the shack. If he'd had that gun, he wouldn't have to hunt like an Indian. He thought of Marble, too, a little pitying, a little resentful, no more.

He was sitting so quietly that even when old Brassguts mounted the ridge, Poor did not move. Like Marble, he simply stared—but differently, aware of privilege. He forgot he was cold, forgot that in a few moments he would kill the old bull, for Poor was looking at something that was beauty to him.

Old Brassguts stopped on the ridge and looked around him. He looked at Poor, not thirty yards away, and did not see him, for Poor's dirty canvas parkee blended perfectly against the cold silver of the poplars.

Brassguts looked all around him, raising his nose a little to sniff the air. His lone horn clicked faintly on the lower branches of a poplar and his neck became rigid. For a long time, he stared over his back trail, his bell swinging pendulum-like in dying arcs until it hung motionless. Then he lowered his head and started grazing off the ridge toward and above Poor.

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Poor sat there, utterly motionless, breathing slowly into the fur of his parkee hood so Brassguts wouldn't see the steam of his breath. The air was dead, still, but the faintest breath of it would carry his scent to the moose, he knew.

Brassguts came on, then paused and looked north up the hill, away from Poor. Slowly, hating it, Poor raised his gun, rested elbow on knee, then thumbed the hammer back.

The click of it was audible and Brassguts swung his head around toward Poor, looking at him and still not seeing him, flicking his mule ears and then stilling them attentively.

Poor shot then, aiming for the spot just behind the shoulder. Brassguts humped a little at the sound of the shot, but did not move. Poor levered his gun again, and his movement sent Brassguts in a startled wheel up the ridge. Poor shot again, carefully, and he saw Brassguts yank up his head but never falter as he achieved the top of the ridge. Poor's third shot was at Brassguts' disappearing rump, and this time Brassguts flinched and disappeared over the ridge.

Poor just sat there, shivering, his eyes cold and bleak. He knew he had hit him the first time and the third time, and he also knew he hadn't hit him bad.

Slowly, Poor looked down at his gun, a light of understanding in his eyes.

"Hell," he said mildly.

He looked up at a thick poplar some fifty yards up the hill from him. There was a big black fester on it some six feet above the snow.

Poor raised his gun, took careful sight at the spot and shot. He saw a spot of raw white bark appear a good two feet over the fester. He shot again, more carefully, and this time he did not hit the tree at all. He shot five more times, sitting there in the snow, and hit the tree only once more, not an inch above the first hit.

Poor stood up stiffly. He already knew the story. At last his gun had won out, though. Brassguts had a slug through the gristle of his rump. Other than that, he was all right.

Poor walked over to his snowshoes, put them on, and started down the hill. He was thinking bitterly that he could have done better with a bow and arrow, and that the dogs would go hungry one more night.

Old Brassguts, a half mile to the east, stopped and looked behind him. He could smell his own blood now, and it made him uneasy. What had he walked into back there? His shoulders felt a little damp and his rump burned hotly and was sore when he walked. He had begun to limp, and the throb in his rump made him forget his ticks.

He stood there a long moment, feeling instinctively that he ought to lie down. But some deep seated caution told him this was not the place. Down on the shore he remembered, there were lots of black spruce and tamarack thickets where he could hole up until this was well. He started out now, traveling in a hurry, his lone horn which he was usually so careful to keep away from noisy brush clicking now and then on low-hanging branches.

"DIDN'T I hear you shoot eight times?" Marble said, when Poor entered the shack. He was tense, on edge.

"All misses," Poor said easily.

"Old Brassguts?"

"The same moose, yes."

Marble laughed unpleasantly. "Well, old bushman, what got into you? I expected you to jump on his back and ride him down here."

Poor said nothing. He could have claimed the excuse that his gun was no good now, that it wouldn't hit a washtub at thirty yards, but something within him warned him to keep quiet. If he told Marble the truth, Marble would jeer at him, saying, "What did I tell you? Everything you own is junk, everything you do is half-cocked." So Poor said nothing.

He could tell from the amount of wood cut up that Marble hadn't been hunting today, and in spite of himself, he couldn't help but be bitter at the thought of that remade thirty-two special out there on its nail all day.

He put the dog's cornmeal on—the last of it—and ate supper. Marble read in his bunk, his face arrogant, defiant. He didn't even need to tell Poor that this was his own private mutiny, and that he was through hunting when there was no game to hunt; that the dogs could starve for all he cared.

Poor knew it, and accepted it. He fed the dogs and turned in, and Marble, mostly out of defiance, read until long after the fire had died and the cold began to creep its savage way into the shack. He went to sleep with the quaver of the hungry dogs in his ears.

The next morning, the cold still held. The sky was cloudless and hard and brutal as ever, and Poor faced the morning with desperation.

When the morning ritual of breakfast and putting on his parkee was finished, Poor said: "I'll get him today."

"Who? Old Brassguts?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to. That is, you will if you want any dogfood."

Poor looked calmly at him. "If *I* want any dogfood," he echoed, puzzled. "If you want any too, I will."

"Don't hunt for my dogs," Marble said blandly. "I'll feed 'em."

For a moment, Poor just stared at him, then he said, "You mean you put out a couple of hundred rabbit snares yesterday?"

"That's just what I don't mean," Marble said flatly. "I didn't do anything yesterday except cut wood. I won't today. But I'll feed my dogs."

Waiting a moment to answer, Poor turned this over in his mind, "Our grub, you mean."

"My grub," Marble corrected him. "It was my money that bought most of it, wasn't it?"

"Sure."

"And I've got a right to feed it, ain't I?"

Poor said nothing, and Marble laughed. "Even if I ain't, I'm goin' to. We may wind up short in the spring, but I'd rather wind up with dogs than with grub." When Poor said nothing, he asked belligerently, "You got anything to say?"

"It's your grub."

"That's what I said."

Poor walked over to the shelf and took down some shells and put them in his pocket. As he went out, Marble was laughing quietly at him.

Closing the door, Poor heard him, and a spark of anger was kindled. For a moment he paused, his hand still on the latchstring, almost ready to go back into the shack. Then he shrugged and let his hand drop. There, before him, hung Marble's new rifle. Poor regarded it for a long

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time, feeling the cold start to seep in through his moccasins, feeling it clamp down on his fingers through his mittens. The gun wasn't going to be used today.

And then he thought, "Oh yes it is," and reached up and took it down along with the big hunting shoes.

HE SET out on the trail up river, the same trail he had traveled yesterday. It was only when he was a half mile from the shack that he knew he had planned to take the gun all the time.

If not, why had he rammed his pockets full of thirty-two special shells? He grinned at that, wondering what Marble would say and not caring. He was going to get old Brassguts this morning and if he knew anything about moose, it would take plenty hunting to do it.

So Poor held to the trail, watching to see where old Brassguts had crossed it. Where the trail turned up the hill, Poor put on the hunting shoes and kept going east, paralleling the river, still seeking the tracks. It was bitter cold, and he bunched his hands up inside his mitts and kept Marble's rifle slung over his shoulder by the crook in his wrist. Where the lamp-wick crossties on the shoes crossed his moccasins, he could feel his feet and toes getting numb.

In an hour of straight bulling it, he came across old Brassguts' tracks. He turned and followed them toward the river, and within two minutes, he came in sight of the black spruce and tamarack thicket.

MARBLE sat in the shack for three minutes after Poor had gone, his anger draining away until it was at the usual simmer. Poor had had his chance for a showdown this morning, and he'd crawled away from it. That proved definitely that he was afraid—and that Marble had ceased forever to take the older man's word in a pinch.

Then Marble rose and sought his parkee and cap. He was going out to the cache and go through the grub, bring it in, and spend the morning cooking up a real feed for his dogs. Outside, he felt the cold strike him in the face, and he grinned when he thought of Poor out in it for the day. His glance raised to the wall of the shack, and he became utterly still. His rifle wasn't there.

For a moment, he just stared at the nail, and then it occurred to him that Poor had taken it. A hot fury boiled up in him, and behind it was the cold finger of accusation. It was as if Poor had said, "Since I'm the only one hunting, I'll just take the best gun."

It was like him, humble, furtive, only hinting at mistakes, never coming out in the open, always looking injured, always meek and quiet. The absence of the gun was like a jeer to Marble. Poor would get old Brassguts and then, forever after, he would think, but never say, "Well, the first day I had a good gun, I got him, didn't I? I saved the dogs. I saved yours too, and don't forget it."

Marble turned and strode back into the shack. From the shelf he grabbed some thirty-thirty shells and put them in his pocket, then went out and took down Poor's old gun.

He headed out on the trail east, forgetting his snowshoes. When he came to the thicket, he was almost exhausted, but his anger hadn't cooled. Following Poor's tracks, he came to the east side of the thicket and saw where Poor had turned in. And then he set about trailing, knowing it was the only way he could find him. He went fast, heedless, breathing hard. The tracks crossed back and forth across the thicket, forth and back.

He followed them for fifteen minutes, his anger still hot and strangling him. And then, looking up, he saw a tiny clearing ahead of him. Poor lay there on his belly, just in the act of bringing his gun to his shoulder to shoot under the trees.

"Poor!" Marble said sharply.

Poor half turned, and there was a thunderous crash in the brush off ahead of him. He swiveled his head back and shot fast three times and then he rose, his face hard and furious, and faced Marble.

"Damn you, give me that gun!" Marble panted.

"You jumped him," Poor said quietly.

"Give me that gun!" Marble shouted.

"He's gone," Poor said calmly "Damn you, you jumped him."

Marble levered a shell into Poor's old gun and said, half gagged with fury, "Will you give me my gun?"

Poor didn't move. He only shook his head. He said, "You're a sorry bushman, Marble. You're just sorry—sorry everything."

Marble threw the gun to his shoulder, cocking it on the way, and lined the sights on Poor's parkee and shot.

POOR backed a little at the sound of the shot. Marble levered the empty out and lined up his sights again, and the fury in him was clouding his eyes, making his aim unsteady, but he shot again.

This time, Poor levered the new gun, raised it, aimed it at Marble and said, "Damn you, put that down," quietly, almost peacefully.

Marble levered the gun a third time and started to raise it.

Poor shot, and lowered his gun. He'd read stories about men being shot and they went down in any way that took the author's fancy, but Marble didn't go down any of these ways.

He just sat down hard, bringing both his hands up to the chest of his parkee, and then he lay back in the snow motionless, his head turning once to the side and staying there.

Poor walked over to him, utterly calm, a little curious. He looked down at Marble and saw that he was dead. Already, checking thought, Poor was wondering if Sergeant McDonald at the post would believe his story. Then he sighed and looked up.

Faintly, very faintly he could hear old Brassguts crashing out of the tamaracks.

"Go on," he said to Brassguts, smiling a little.

. . . When Brassguts was clear of the thicket, he paused. He was getting out of this country, rump or no rump. He did not know it, but he had lost his other horn in his flight. He limped a little as he started out up the hill, traveling fast and steady. By afternoon most of the stiffness had gone and he felt better. He paused once to blow himself on the brow of ridge far up on the hill. Lifting his head, he sniffed at the air.

Snow was coming.

But old Brassguts went on. He was leaving the country. By the time he reached the top of the hill at dusk, the sky was clouded over and it had warmed up. By the time he was well into the muskeg, it had begun to snow.

And all down the long miles of that ridge, where the hill flattened out into tamarack muskeg, the moose came to life. They started down the hill into the valley, one of them passing old Brassguts. Back there, old Brassguts knew, there was feed and lots of it, and he would be warm again. But he was leaving the country.

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He repeated it for her as they waltzed: "There is no reason why a man should not use his head when he falls in love."

Northward Rails

By Frank Bunce

JEFFREY CRAIG, railroad builder, finds the cards stacked against him when he arrives at the little Wisconsin settlement of Lakehead in June, 1855. Wherever he turns in the community, his name is a mark of hatred and distrust.

His old friend MIKE SLANE—raw, uncouth, and loyal—explains that the people in this country have been promised a railroad, to be built by a corporation whose sole purpose, Slane says, is to get control of the state and its resources.

At the corporation's head is WILLIAM BARSTOW, whom Craig remembers as a ruthless exploiter of railroads. Fronting for him are LUKE GRANVILLE, Madison banker, and MILT WYCLIFFE, publisher of Lakehead's paper.

But Mike Slane has great news for Craig. Having won (through a rigged poker game) a seat in the Wisconsin state senate, Mike has chartered a railroad with Craig as president and chief engineer. It parallels the line chartered to Barstow's company, starting at Junction City eight miles south of Lakehead and terminating at any point on the shore of Lake Superior, three hundred and fifty miles north. With it goes a chance at the biggest land grant in the history of the Northwest.

And herein lies the reason for the town's hostility toward Jeffrey Craig. "A railroad is a life an' death matter to these people," Slane tells him. "An' they think you're out to bleed their road to death."

Craig's efforts to expose Barstow's fraud to the settlers are defeated when ANN WYCLIFFE, Milt's niece, pledges to the project the property left by her father, the late Judge David Wycliffe, whose name is still highly respected in the community. After that, Barstow has little difficulty in getting the settlers to mortgage their farms to finance the railroad he has promised them—the road he will exploit, but never plans to build.

MEANWHILE Craig has sent young TOM DURSTINE north to survey the line of his own road. Taking a quick trip to his home in Boston, he persuades his brother, EBEN CRAIG, to lend him enough money to make up a quarter of a million dollars, to finance the building.

But trouble strikes hard on his return: Durstine, returning to Lakehead to turn the survey records over to Slane, has been attacked and the records have been stolen.

Slane has more bad news. Barstow's outfit has taken in two or three million dollars' worth of mortgages from the settlers, but not a mile of the promised road has been surveyed. Barstow has been telling people that Craig is to blame for grabbing off the only practical route; and an indignation meeting is being planned for the following Saturday.

Not waiting for that, Craig and Slane go directly to Ann Wycliffe's home, where Barstow has established headquarters; and Craig warns Barstow that he will not stand for having any more of his men hurt as Durstine was hurt.

But Barstow, unable to buy his rival out, has a proposition. He offers to give Craig a charter to the Kaukalin and Western, a line branching northeast from the one Craig is now surveying, in exchange for the charter Craig now holds. With the K. and W. he will lend three thousand tons of rail iron, and make a reciprocal agreement for mutual use of each road by the other's cars.

Feeling that the offer is fair, Craig accepts. But after he leaves, Barstow tells his engineer that there's a joker in his deck—a joker Craig will never see until it is too late. . . .

This story began in the Argosy for July 12

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CHAPTER XII

LADY IN THE DARK

THE day after he reached his agreement with Craig, Barstow went south to Junction City, hired men and teams, and began building grade; but he proceeded in such indifferent fashion that when the first bad freeze came to halt operations for the year, he had only a few miles of roadbed completed.

Soon after, he returned to Chicago for the winter, leaving Milton Wycliffe alone in Lakehead to explain as best he might the road's failure to make better progress.

That was not easy. Men were beginning to ask questions. A meeting of the Black Creek Literary Society debated the proposition: *Resolved, that a Citizenry has the right to resist with armed might the enforcement of oppressive and unjust laws.* Not a man there failed to realize that if his doubts were justified, some time he might have to decide that proposition for himself in grim earnest, only phrased a little differently.

Not *Resolved that a citizenry has the right to resist;* but *Resolved, that I a citizen . . . with armed might.* With fists, clubs, or that rifle I used yesterday, hunting deer.

Wycliffe sensed this gathering storm of doubt, and grew uneasy before it; the more so as he was entirely ignorant of what Barstow and Granville intended. Toward spring he dispatched a frantic letter to Barstow, begging him to come back and do something to quiet people.

And Barstow's response was magnificent. He not merely came back; he came in command of a conquering army. A corps of surveyors went in advance, checking, reaffirming the line Durstine had staked; and behind them marched columns of graders and track layers, accompanied by swarms of camp followers: gamblers, saloonkeepers, town men, in unprecedented profusion.

Then once more the country was swept by railroad fever. All the doubts and fears of the winter vanished like its snows; the point for debate now was not whether the railroad ever would be built, but how soon. Men said: "She'll be here at Lakehead by the Fourth. Eighty, nearer ninety miles in three months. That rate, she'll be done by next spring, an' payin' dividends."

Others, more conservative, cautioned: "Wal, can't figure it by the month. Not for twelve months straight. There's winter out, an' some o' the wet fall months—most half the year. It'll take another summer, anyhow."

That sobered the optimists, momentarily. Another summer—their mortgages, drawn for two years, would be due before that was over. But then they thought up answers: "It wouldn't need to take another summer. Barstow could get more gangs, build her in sections, a hundred miles a month, if there was any pinch. But where's the pinch? The most important section is done now, or will be by the Fourth, an' it'll start payin' dividends with the first train runs over it."

"An' then there's all that land. Three, four hundred thousand acres we'll git, soon as the road is finished to here. . . "

ABOUT the mortgages they spoke little, but when the subject did happen to come up they dismissed it quickly. "Nobody needs to git in a sweat about mortgages. These ain't ordinary mortgages. They can't be foreclosed. They're jest hypothecated—put up to git credit."

Nobody ever asked whom the mortgages were being put up with; who was supplying the credit. That point had never been explained.

But this was a people's railroad, and a united people could do anything they set out to do. Such was their faith. Timber men gave crossties, merchants supplies; farmers, whenever they had a slack day or two, took teams to the grade camps and pitched in to help.

They gave with no thought of compensation; and it was with sincere surprise that they received letters, enclosing drafts negotiable against stock certificates, in payment for their goods or services, signed *Bill Barstow, Construction Engineer.* Their help, he said, was needed and appreciated, but he insisted upon paying for it; they had contributed enough already to the railroad with the mortgage fund.

That name, Bill Barstow, soon became familiar on men's lips, and it was spoken with a feeling that was almost reverential. Bill Barstow, they vowed, was all right.

He gave them more, however, than drafts against stock certificates, and pleasing letters. He was giving them a thrill show with heroes: himself and Granville; the surveyors and engineers; frequent great visitors. It had villains, too. Jeffrey Craig. All eastern bankers. The inspectors.

For the inspectors a deeper hatred developed than for any of the others, as the progress of the road first slowed, then stalled for weeks together. The Fourth of July came with the railhead still twenty miles away; and fury swept the crowds assembled in Lakehead to celebrate its arrival there, when it was learned that the delay was due to the inspectors' dictum that a four-mile stretch just north of Fond du Lac be torn up and relocated.

Granville spoke, promising that the road would arrive on August first, and saving the affair from complete failure by impressively breaking ground for a Lakehead depot. But delay succeeded delay, and it was well into September when the grade camp was moved up and pitched in the lower meadow of the Wycliffe farm.

ANN joined a crowd of hundreds that had come out from town to see the camp erected. All was done so swiftly and expertly that when the grading crew straggled in from their day's work, they found everything just as it had been when the camp sat six miles farther back; every board bunk, straw pallet in its proper place, not a bridle peg or halter rope missing. It was as if the camp had been lifted, by some sort of magic, and carried entire over all that distance.

And in a sense there was magic in it; the magic of Barstow's real genius for organization. He arrived with the men, and would have eaten with them if Ann had not dragged him off to supper with her.

She had to wait, however, while he conferred with some of his bosses, and she was impressed by the swiftness and versatility of his mind. Though he was grimed, sodden, roughly dressed, she found him more attractive than ever before.

After supper he sat in the library, smoking, talking about the railroad and some of the problems he faced. Her uncle dozed in a corner, out of the light, so unobtrusive that Ann and Barstow seemed alone in the house together.

He seemed rueful at not getting the railroad through on schedule. These delays were more than annoying, he said; they slowed construction, made it costly. And, he added ominously, the road could not afford to lose either time or money now.

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"You aren't running short of money already, are you?" she asked anxiously.

He seemed to hesitate, and then he said: "Yes. We are. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you this, but unless we get more money somewhere soon, we're going to have to stop work. I'm hoping, of course, that the legislature will allow us some land."

"What if they don't?" she said.

"I don't like to think of that." He was slumped down into his chair, looking depressed, worried. "You know," he said, "I almost wish I'd kept that K. and W. charter and let Craig have this line to do with as he pleased. He's almost finished there, I hear."

"His graders have finished. His track crews will be through in a day or two. Uncle was telling me only yesterday."

"He drove a hard bargain," Barstow said. "That line will be a gold mine; and he's put almost nothing into it. If I'd been considering only myself, and not my investors—you and everyone else that entrusted money with me—I'd never have made the deal. I suppose I was a fool."

"Perhaps. But a wonderful, lovable kind of fool."

She spoke with a warmth and tenderness evoked by her sympathy for his distress, but she was not prepared for the intensity of his response. Something stirred behind the hard, polished surfaces of his eyes: a passion so immediate that her own eyes fell, and she shrank from it in instinctive panic.

He said, in a low, deep, urgent voice: "You used a word just then. I'd like to know what you meant by it."

"WHAT word?" She was confused, breathless. He had risen, towering over her—his eyes large, dark, compelling in his white face. His voice, when he spoke, had a new note, a masculine depth and urgency, that at once fascinated and frightened her:

"An adjective. One that you used in describing the kind of fool I am."

"Wonderful?" she said faintly, deliberately evasive.

"Not that one." He waited, but when she said nothing, he went on, in a changed voice: "I thought you meant something by it, but I seem to have been mistaken. I'm sorry."

He shrugged, walked to the hallway. She followed, distressed. "I'm sorry, too. I don't know—I'd have to have time to think—"

"Of course." He was gentle now, but she could feel that urgency still in him. "I'll ask you again, perhaps. But now—you've heard, I suppose, about the dance we're planning?"

"Yes," she said. "It's for Saturday, isn't it, if the road is through by then?"

"It will be through. I'll ask your help in planning it. I may have time tomorrow to come up and talk to you about it."

He turned definitely away; and a moment later she could hear his firm, quick footsteps on the piazza, dwindling on the graveled driveway.

Ann went to her own room, but not to sleep. The tumult of fear and fascination Barstow had aroused in her kept her wide awake, disturbed and wondering.

The fascination she understood. Even divested of his romantic reputation as a mighty builder and financier, he was man enough to fascinate any woman. But she was unable to understand her fear.

It was an instinctive, not a reasoned feeling. Although, she thought, she had every reason to distrust Jeffrey Craig, she would never fear him in quite that way. Yet it was conceivable that, in the same circumstances, he might have reacted about like Barstow: he too might have asked her to define her adjectives.

She sat up in the big four-poster bed, and parted the heavy silk canopy to look for the twentieth time at the little Swiss clock on her bed table; then lay back to study with some disfavor her own slim, girlish form outlined under the coverlet. The trouble was, she decided, that she was too young, too inexperienced in dealing with anyone but boys. If she were to duel with grown men, she would have to learn to be more circumspect.

"One thing I will do after this. I'll watch my adjectives," she promised herself.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO BY THE PUNCH BOWL

BARSTOW came late next afternoon and stayed only a few minutes, confining himself to a business-like discussion of the celebration he planned for the following Saturday. He had arranged to borrow three passenger coaches from the M. and M., and these were to be filled with notables and run northward from Junction City.

He asked her to engage an orchestra of local musicians, provide punch for the evening dance, and do something toward decorating the depot, still unfinished, where the dance would be held. Then he departed, leaving her feeling a little foolish for having dreaded his coming all day.

Yet she had no illusion that he had been unaware of the effect he had upon her the night before, or that he would fail to renew the attack. That thought added excitement to the days that followed. She sensed peril, but it was peril of a kind she could enjoy. It was a challenge to her wit and courage, like some new, dangerous game, which she enjoyed the more because she found herself playing it with increasing skill and confidence.

She began testing on him certain little tricks of eyes and voice that had been highly effective with boys, and was elated beyond measure when she perceived that they moved him too; she sampled flattery, and his response to that was prompt and emphatic also. She was learning what all the enchantresses of the world have known instinctively: that men of all kinds and all ages respond to the same stimuli.

She thought she was being so adroit that no one would see any change in their relationship; and she was astonished one evening when her uncle said abruptly:

"Ann, you've been seeing quite a lot of Barstow lately, haven't you? Alone?"

"Why, yes," she said. "I'm helping him make arrangements for the dance, you know."

He did not look directly at her. He kept his head bent over a sheaf of proofs he was pawing in his fussy, futile-seeming way, but she could see enough to his face to be aware that he was scowling in a way quite different from his customary frown of weak irritation.

"Ann," he said—and his voice was different too: hesitant, but holding a note of dogged determination—"I promised your father that I'd look after you. That's all he ever asked of me, and all I ever promised him, but it's one thing I mean to do. I want you to stop seeing so much of Barstow. He's not the kind you should be seeing alone."

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"Why?" she said.

His scowl deepened, but he had no reply ready. There was no adequate answer he could have made without betraying too much about himself. Finally he said, weakly evasive: "Well, for one thing, he's much too old for you."

Ann's answer was any woman's. "How old is he?" she said. And then she was sincerely mystified because he refused brusquely to give her any answer.

She gave scant heed to his warning, though she was touched by his concern for her. It revealed another, more attractive side of a nature she had thought wholly petulant, self-centered.

THAT Saturday was clear and warm. Long before noon the town was filling, and two thousand people picnicked together in a big oak grove behind the new depot, their holidaying clatter mingling with the suave click of roulette balls, the clink of whiskey glasses from the impermanent board saloons across the shining new track.

At about one o'clock the work train went through with rails for the front, now extended to a point three or four miles north of town. It was roundly cheered by the merrymakers on both side of the track, who settled back then to await the arrival of the special.

They had a long wait. At each of the four stops the train had made, all the notables aboard had insisted upon speaking at considerable length; and it was near nightfall when the flag-bedecked, bell-stacked little engine and the buntinged wooden coaches rolled into the depot, the shrill screech of its whistle almost, but not quite, drowning the most valiant efforts of a brass band from Fond du Lac.

The notables spoke again: the president of the M. and M.; the mayors of Milwaukee, Madison, Fond du Lac, and sundry lesser places; Wycliffe, and finally, Barstow.

"I hadn't intended to speak at all today," Barstow said. "I feel that this road speaks for me, and I'm up here now only to offer an apology. I had thought we'd have the governor to address us again today, and at least one of our Washington senators. But they offered excuses. Perhaps you can guess why."

The crowd murmured uneasy assent. In Wycliffe's paper that week had been a hint that the effort to obtain a part of the land subsidy was encountering opposition; and this would explain the absence of the governor and the senators, all notorious for their habit of evading all controversial issues.

Barstow spread his hands, enforcing silence. "There is no need for alarm. It's only another obstacle, like a hill or river. We'll conquer it, if we'll stand together—continue to trust one another, work to a common end. Will you do that?"

There was an eager chorus of agreement. At a signal from Granville, the band began to play; and Barstow was cheered roundly as he withdrew from the rear platform of the train. From the fringe of the crowd Ann joined in the cheer; but later, going away by herself, she wondered just what had stirred her so.

But she forgot her doubts in the bustle of assembling an orchestra, making punch and helping decorate the depot; then, long after dark, hurrying home to dress.

She knew she was going to be late, but she did not care. She was arming herself for an evening that she felt would offer her the first great adventure of her life: some crisis of her relationship with Barstow; and she wanted her weapons clean and bright.

She spent some time in arranging her hair, leaving intact the short front curls that were hers by nature, but brushing out the curls at the sides and back of her head and imprisoning them into a chignon. She was pleased to observe that she felt and looked more mature as a result; and she sought a dress that would heighten the effect, finally settling upon a black bombazine with short puffed sleeves and a collar of princess lace that seemed to give her more stature and dignity.

She put a rose in her hair, drew a white mink cloak about her shoulders, and then stood gazing at the image from her own mirror in frank pleasure. The cloak, the dress and chignon had achieved their purpose; she did look older, more sophisticated, without having lost any of the glow and glamour of her youth. She was going to be, she was sure, quite irresistible.

BUT at the depot a sudden shyness gripped her. The light from the glassless windows fell upon groups of people hesitating outside, and she longed to join them in placid obscurity. But the music of the orchestra she had engaged—four violins, a banjo, three harmonicas, playing a reel—was irresistible, and she went on in, her head high, her cheeks burning under the sudden regard of numberless pairs of eyes, certain now that everything about herself was wrong: her dress too old for her, her slippers probably dusty from walking, her coiffure ridiculous. But she had swift reassurance.

Barstow, in full evening dress, was standing not far from the door. She hurried on by without appearing to notice him, but she was aware that the tribute of his glance followed her; and she knew then, with a singing inner joy, that she had not failed.

This excitement she felt now was so complete that there was no room in her mind for fear.

The depot was pleasantly redolent of pine sap, and its new board walls had a still, gaunt beauty under the high rose-shaded lights she had hung that afternoon. It looked immense, cavernous; unpartitioned yet, furnished with nothing but a few benches along the walls, a platform for the orchestra, and a table in one corner, on which a big punch bowl was set.

Pausing there for a moment, Ann saw that Barstow had detached himself from a group by the door, and was approaching her. He accepted the glass of punch offered him, but his gaze did not leave Ann's face.

"I didn't know you could look like this," he said, in a low, urgent voice. "I want to ask a question of you. It's confidential, personal, romantic; I can think of no better background for it than a waltz. May I have the next waltz with you?"

He leaned closer to her.

"I shall be delighted," Ann said. She could think of nothing better than that prim response, taught her as a school-girl, and she had difficulty even in saying that. His nearness, the compelling urgency of his voice and eyes, destroyed her poise; she was gripped by the same helpless confusion she had felt with him before.

She was enormously relieved to be diverted first by a man and woman wanting punch, then by some boy she ought to have known who asked her to join him in a reel. She danced with a feverish abandon, and then returned to the punch bowl in time to dip up a glass of punch for a tall man in rough clothes. With a start of surprise she recognized Jeffrey Craig.

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CHAPTER XIV

DON'T TREAD ON ME

HE TOOK the punch, but set it down untasted. "May I have this dance?" he said. At that moment the orchestra resumed; and without waiting for an answer he took her hand and led her out upon the floor. In her confusion she yielded herself to his encircling arm, and they had danced almost to the middle of the floor before she became aware that she had made a horrible blunder.

She stopped dancing suddenly. "Oh, no! I can't dance with you," she said, in a stricken voice.

He had not stopped with her. His hand holding hers tightened insistently, while his arm around her waist increased its pressure, so that she had no recourse but to go on with him.

"Why not?" he said, quite calmly. "Am I that bad?"

"No. Oh, no!" she said. "That isn't it at all. But this is a waltz, and I promised the first waltz to Mr. Barstow. Let me go, please." He did not release her, and she said, in a panic: "Aren't you going to let me go?"

"I don't know," he said, in a meditative, judicial tone. "You pose a nice problem in etiquette. You started this dance with me, and by all the rules, you should finish it with me. If you left me now for another man, people might talk. It's not good form to divide a waltz set between two men, you know."

"But I promised the set to him!" she protested.

"I know. You said that before. And by the rules you should have danced it with him. You're guilty of a grave social error whatever you do; but offhand I'd say you'd be better off to finish it with me. Barstow, of course, is furious, but for the moment impotent to do anything about it. I should be furious, too, if you insisted upon leaving me—but far from impotent."

The firm compulsion of his hands left no doubt in her mind about what he meant. To get away from him, she would have to fight, and she was not even sure that fighting would do her any good. It had certainly done her no good to try to stop dancing. He had only dragged her along with him, so that to the spectators it must have seemed that she had made a misstep; but obviously he cared nothing about what the spectators thought.

In her embarrassment and fury she kept making false steps, which he corrected with a tolerant patience that only added to her resentment. With relief she heard the orchestra playing the closing bars of the waltz. But then, to her horror, they began again, without pause, playing the piece all over again.

"This is likely to be an unusually long set," Craig was saying down into her ear. "You see, I talked to the musicians before I came to you."

She looked up at him in surprise. "Are the musicians friends of yours?"

"No. They don't even know me. If they did, they'd hardly be likely to grant me any favors. I led them to believe I was acting on behalf of Barstow, though I didn't specifically say so. I only said that he had the next waltz with the loveliest girl in Wisconsin, and that in respect to him it ought to be made a good, long set."

Ann grew rigid in his arms. "Then you knew I had this dance with him! You schemed all this to embarrass me—humiliate him!"

She was furious with him, furious with herself for having been so stupid as not to have guessed that before. His lack of surprise when she had confessed her mistake—indeed, the very cavalier way in which he had danced off with her, without waiting for her consent—should have told her that.

HE SEEMED unabashed. He answered, in the same reasonable tone: "You're partly right. I was watching from outside, by one of the windows, and I guessed he had asked you for a waltz. A reel or polka is a graceful exercise, but neither romantic nor intimate; and romantic intimacy, of course, is what he wanted. But you're wrong about my motives. I took you away from him neither to embarrass you nor to humiliate him."

"Then why did you do it?" she demanded.

"Because I had been watching you, and I could see that you were losing your head about him. And Barstow is not a man with whom a girl can safely lose her head."

She tried, in outrage, to jerk away from him, but he held her firmly, while he went on: "There are two things a man can do when he sees a girl getting foolish about such a man. He can stand by helplessly until a time comes when he can offer her a shoulder to cry one; or he can try to do something. I prefer the latter course. I detest weeping women."

"You needn't worry. I'll never be weeping on you," Ann said; though at the moment she was perilously close to it—from rage, not grief. She was so infuriated that she wanted to scratch him; but since that was impossible, she had to be content with jibes. "I suppose," she said cuttingly, "you think this one dance is going to be enough to turn my head the other way—toward you?"

He inclined his head, with exaggerted humility. "I had dared to hope so."

That reduced her to speechlessness. They danced on, to the interminable music, and presently it occurred to her to look for Barstow. But Craig was keeping her so near the center of the floor that she could see nothing beyond the whirl of other dancers. That glance did something toward reassuring her. They weren't the only couple on the floor—her position was not so scandalous as she had feared.

Craig seemed to read her thought, for he bent to say, in a softer, intimate tone: "You needn't be embarrassed. You're charming, even when your head is being turned, if that's what has been bothering you. Perhaps it's even your most appealing mood.

"I hadn't intended to dance tonight. I stopped only to look in for a moment, before starting back north, but I couldn't resist you. I ask you to believe that that's the real reason I'm here with you. It is true that I took advantage of a moment's absentmindedness on your part; but is there any valid reason why a man should lose the use of his brain the moment he falls in love?"

She looked up at him, startled. "What did you say?"

"I said," he repeated evenly, "that there is no reason why a man should not use his head when he falls in love."

"Oh," she said weakly; caught again in a whirlwind of confusion. But there was a difference now; now there was no fear or revulsion in it.

There was a perceptible halting note in the music. Craig bent to speak hurriedly down to her: "There are a good many things I'd like to say to you—some about yourself, that might please you; some, about others, that might not. You wouldn't understand them now. You'll not understand many things that are going to happen before this railroad is finished. But I wish you would reserve judgment until it's all over. Please try to do that."

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The music stopped. He released her, walked with her back to the punch bowl. With the other dancers dissolving from around her, she was able to see Barstow for the first time since the dance had started; and for the first time she realized that this incident might have consequences more immediate and brutal than a mere moment's scandal.

Barstow was standing motionless, apparently composed, except for the nervous twitching of his nostrils; but his mustached upper lip was lifted a little away from his strong, white teeth; and his eyes, hard and brilliant, were fixed on Craig with a deadly intentness.

CRAIG put a hand on her elbow, mutely commanding her to stay where she was, and went on alone toward the other man.

"Hello, Barstow," he said. He stopped only a few feet away and stood erect, alert, his heavily booted feet about eighteen inches apart, the left foot a little behind the right, the heel lifted—ready for either attack or defense.

There was the same suggestion of coiled alertness in Barstow, too; and it occurred to Ann, watching them with a dreadful fascination, to marvel that they could be so much alike, yet so fundamentally inimical. Both were powerfully made—Craig an inch or two the taller, Barstow the heavier by a few pounds; yet in both was a pard-like grace.

Craig had the best type of Yankee head, long, broad across the temples, but narrow-jawed, the features prominent and strong, but moulded with a certain delicacy. Barstow's head was shorter, his jaw more formidable, his forehead slightly recessive and narrower, his skin bloodless; but basically it was the same kind of head as Craig's, a refinement upon a strong primitive type.

Then, too, both men were intensely alive. But despite all this similarity, there was something fundamentally antipathetic about them. They were predestined to battle by something in their own natures, irreconcilable as fire and water.

Barstow said, in a slow, sleek voice: "Craig, I'm beginning to find you a bit of a nuisance. You're too light-fingered. First you tried to steal a railroad from me. Now you're attempting to steal something of a more personal, intimate nature."

"You're too careless with words," Craig said. "A thing can't be stolen from you until you've first established ownership."

"I feel that I have," Barstow said. "I'll tell you something, Craig. I prefer to think that the things I want are mine, and that anyone who tries to get to them ahead of me is a thief, and should be dealt with accordingly."

"Would you like to try dealing with me now? Outside?" Craig asked him pleasantly.

Barstow hesitated. It was not fear that made him pause. There was no fear in the man, but only a cold, intelligence that estimated chances, weighed results. He said finally: "No. Not now. I'm still holding too much. I'd be as foolish as a man who would let himself be goaded into a gunfight when he's holding a royal flush. But don't presume too far, Craig. I'm reasonably tolerant of thievery, but not of the thief who insults me by doing it openly. Don't try it again Good night."

"Good night," Craig said. He turned and bowed to Ann, and walked away to the door.

One of the fiddlers approached Barstow. He was looking rueful.

"By gum, Mr. Barstow, we played that waltz through three times fer you 'fore we saw you wasn't on the floor. You want us to play it again now?"

Barstow glanced at Ann. Her eyes had followed Craig, and they stayed on the door through which he disappeared with a fond fascination. He turned back to the fiddler, smiling without amusement.

"No. You couldn't play it. Not that waltz again, tonight," he said, to the other's complete mystification.

CHAPTER XV

HALF A MILLION WISHES

NEXT day the graders' camp was moved north. The track layers followed a few days later, and with them went the gamblers and town men and saloonkeepers and other camp followers, to set up another makeshift town at North Junction, where the railroad met Craig's Kaukalin and Western line.

The camps were moved once more, to the county line, five miles farther on; but by then the work of construction had begun to falter; and at the end of September, long before the freezeup came, it halted altogether.

Failure was not admitted yet. Barstow went to Madison; to join Granville, said Wycliffe's paper, in putting pressure on the legislature to grant part of the land subsidy. His chances of obtaining it, Wycliffe said, were excellent.

No one worried much until, toward the end of the winter, the paper began to change its tone, bitterly assailing legislators from other parts of the state, particularly the Milwaukee and Dodgeville areas, for blocking the appropriation. By spring, subtly admitting defeat, Wycliffe was saying that reorganization might be necessary.

Reorganization was a new word to most of his readers, and one not very well understood. How, asked people, would mere reorganization help? Wycliffe answered that by going into receivership, reorganizing as another company, they could retain all the privileges and immunities of the old company, including its right to the land grant, but legally repudiate its obligations.

This did not mean, he hastened to add, that all just debts would not be paid, but only that the unjust debts could be fairly compromised, because the company would be in an invincible bargaining position.

It was no secret, he said, that for certain commodities the railroad had been charged outrageous prices. For rail iron, to name but one item, they had been obliged to pay four or five times the market price to get quick delivery. Such debts could be scaled down.

That argument seemed sound enough, though a few remained dubious. Why, they asked, were there any debts, just or unjust? If the railroad had been built with credit, where had all the mortgage money gone?

But the questioners were few. Even such shrewd, hard-headed men as Wells, the lumberman, and Ely Nathan, the Black Creek settler, were present at the meeting called to consider reorganization, and heard Granville's explanation of what it involved with a sympathy shared by most of the three or four hundred other committeemen present.

The road was to be thrown into receivership, the receiver would recommend the sale of the road, and it would be bought back at receiver's auction for a nominal figure of, say, half a million dollars. A new company would then be formed, and certificates for its capital stock distributed equitably among its purchasers.

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Granville was persuasive in emphasizing the advantages of the plan; but when he was through there were some questions.

Wells began it. "Who's going to put up the half million to buy the road back?"

"Anybody that wants to," Granville answered promptly. "I'd be delighted to put up the whole sum myself. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to buy a four or five-million-dollar property for a tenth its value? But of course you wouldn't permit that. It would be brigandage of the worst kind, and"—Granville smiled—"I value my skin too much to practice daylight robbery in this country."

Wells said, in his slow, ponderous way: You mean we'll have to raise another half million to buy back our own road. That's about what you're saying, isn't it?"

This time Granville was a little less prompt in replying: "That's putting it rather baldly, Mr. Wells. We are buying back the road; but since we're both buyer and seller, we're only taking the money out of one pocket, putting it into another. No one of our investors that has faith and courage enough to go all the way with us can lose anything."

"What about those that haven't?" asked Wells.

"They'll get ten cents on the dollar. That's all. They'll lose, just as you would lose, if you gave up the first time your spring drive jammed."

Ely spoke up: "What about those of us that ain't got any more money to put up?"

"You have property, haven't you? Cattle, horses, personal effects. They're as good as money, in this country."

LATER, when the two were alone, Barstow said approvingly: "Nice work, Luke. You talked so convincingly that you almost convinced me."

"I almost convinced myself." Granville sank back into the rickety deep chair that was the best the Wisconsin House afforded, puffed nervously at a cigar. "I wasn't bluffing when I said I'd be afraid to steal a railroad from men like them. I'm scared even thinking about it."

"You needn't be. We're not going to steal it, from them."

Granville looked at him inquiringly, and Barstow said: "I want you to send someone around to Craig, to make him an offer for the K. and W. He can represent himself as an independent buyer, but leave a card with my Chicago address. Make him a good offer, though not too good. Say five hundred thousand dollars."

"That's not a good offer. The road's worth five times that. Craig will laugh at it."

"He'll not laugh. By this time he's beginning to realize why we let him have the K. and W. charter and all that rail iron on such liberal terms. He'll be remembering that those rails were rented to him, not sold."

"But we contracted to let him have them in perpetuity, at a fixed rental. We can't take them back."

"As the People's Railway Company we can't take them back. But as a new company we could, for by going through receivership we obliterate all our obligations, including all such contracts. There's the joker in those agreements we signed with him, Luke."

GRANVILLE whistled softly, in admiring astonishment, and Barstow went on, well pleased by this tribute: "He won't sell, of course. Not now. He's a fighter, and he'll elect to wait it out. But he'll not forget that such an offer has been made. There's the important thing: when he needs half a million dollars, he'll look up your agent—that is to say, me. And he's going to need it. Desperately."

"For what?" asked Granville.

"For survival. To save his own skin. I know Craig now. He's cool, clever, fearless—a magnificent gambler. But even the best of gamblers lose when they sit in on a rigged game, and don't know it. I'm going to give him a nerve test, Luke. If he cracks, I'll own this railroad, the K. and W.—and him. If he doesn't, I'll destroy him."

Up to the last, everything went exactly according to plan. Foreclosure proceedings were instituted against the railroad in October; in December the court appointed a receiver, and in February he called a meeting to secure the formal consent of the stockholders to the sale of the road. It was unanimously granted; and in the following month Wycliffe was sent to the foreclosure sale at Junction City, armed with a draft for $500,000 for its purchase.

But then something unforeseen occurred. The road went to Jeffrey Craig for $528,473.61.

In the storm of fury that broke when the news was made public, one significant detail was overlooked: the peculiar penny-precision of the bid. Not more than half a dozen persons knew, or were able to guess, that Craig, on a whimsical impulse, had tacked on the last seven figures because they represented the exact total of his deposits in the bank on which he had drawn the draft. The rest, a cool $500,000, he had to raise somewhere before the draft went through.

CHAPTER XVI

NO SLEEP FOR SLAVE

MIKE SLANE was one of the few who guessed that, and from the capital he wired a guarded inquiry to Craig's Kaukalin office. An answering wire informed him that Craig was in Chicago, and within an hour Slane was en-route there.

The wire had said nothing about where Craig could be

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found, but Slane knew his man. He told a hack driver to take him to the best hotel; and as he had anticipated, he found Craig registered there.

The door to his room—corner front, equipped with ornate marble fireplace, gilded chairs, a vast, silk-canopied bed—was open, but the room unoccupied. Mike waited impatiently an hour or more, then thought of something and went down the corridors looking for a room marked *Bath.* When he found it he clamored confidently for admission.

The door came open. Craig's nobly proportioned figure settled back into a steaming porcelain tub.

"Hello, Mike," he said casually, then immersed himself so completely that only his mouth and nose protruded.

Slane stared down at him in outrage. For twelve hours, ever since hearing of the sale, he had been frantic with anxiety, picturing Craig in desperate quest, alone, of funds Mike knew he must have quickly. Now Craig was idling away hours in a tub, in the middle of the day.

A cheering thought came to him. "Jeff, you got the money!"

Craig lifted his head just enough so that he could speak without getting a mouthful of water. "What money?"

Slane sucked in his breath noisily, fighting for control. "You damn fool—the five hundred thousand dollars you got to have to cover the draft you gave fer that railroad!"

"Oh, that," said Craig. "No, I haven't got it, Mike. Close the door, will you, please? That hall air is chilly."

Slane slammed the door viciously between them and stamped off down the hall. He was waiting in sullen speechlessness in Craig's room when, half an hour later, the latter returned to it. He wore a bright blue satin dressing gown and a coat and pants of green silk that Mike decided must be one of these damfool sleeping suits. He had a smug, shined look, and he was whistling blithely.

Slane said nothing, only glancing with exquisite sarcasm at a gilt-and-ivory clock on the mantelpiece which pointed to a quarter of twelve. But Craig missed the point.

"Time I was having breakfast," he said.

He summoned a waiter, and after considerable discussion, succeeded in getting a breakfast that seemed to satisfy him: peaches and cream, beaten biscuits and marmalade, kippered herring, a ham steak flanked with four rashers of bacon, kidneys and poached eggs, tea. He looked inquiringly at Slane.

"The usual thing?" he said. Slane grunted surly assent, and Craig said to the waiter: "A bottle of whiskey."

"What kind of whiskey?" the waiter asked.

"Any kind. My friend, Mr. Slane, is broadminded about whiskies."

FOR once, however, Slane found little pleasure in drinking. He managed to keep silent until Craig had about finished his incredible breakfast, and then his control cracked.

"Damn you, Jeff, ain't you got sense enough to realize what a jam you're in?" he snarled. Craig raised an inquiring eyebrow, and Slane said: "You walked right into a trap, givin' your draft to a court officer fer money you ain't got. That's a penitentiary offense."

"It is if you get caught at it," Craig said. "As I figure it, though, Mike, the draft will require five days, all told, to clear through the court at Madison and get here. That still gives me three days."

"You've found someone that will give you the money?" Slane asked.

"Found is hardly the word, Mike. I haven't looked. I've only been lolling here, so to speak, awaiting a visitor who will proffer it."

"Who?" said Slane.

"A man named Trayner. Either him or Barstow. It's all the same thing.

"Jeff," said Slane, "that's plain foolishness, an' you know it. Barstow wouldn't lift a hand to keep you outa jail. There's nothin' he'd like better'n to see you there."

"Yes, there is. There are several things he'd like better, and one of them is my K. and W. railroad. That could be a gold mine; and Barstow isn't the man to sacrifice profits for revenge. Early last fall this man Traynor came up to Kaukalin to make me an offer for the road. I declined it, but he left his card, and suggested that I look him up if I changed my mind. The address he gave was the same as Barstow's here; and his offer was for five hundred thousand dollars. Does that sum mean anything to you?"

"Of course! It's what you need to make your draft good. But that was jest bait, to git you to bid on their railroad. You don't think Barstow'll give you five hundred thousand now, the shape you're in?"

"He won't want to. He's hoping, of course, that my nerve will crack, and I'll go crawling to him, offering to sell out at any terms. But I'm not going to him, Mike. I'm staying here, and standing pat on five hundred thousand."

Slane took a breath. "Why didn't you take that five hundred thousand when he offered it?"

"If I'd taken it then, I might not have been permitted to buy the Northern. That's what I've named my new road, Mike—the Wisconsin Northern. I know very well I wouldn't have been permitted to buy it and still hang onto the other thing I want."

"What other thing?"

CRAIG finished his tea, took up a pipe. He answered: "I'd better not tell you now, Mike. You'd faint. This is a sweet little guessing game we're playing, Barstow and I. Each of us thinks he knows what the other will do, but neither of us can be sure. The best you can do is make as shrewd a guess as possible, then back your judgment with everything you have."

"Includin' five or ten years o' your life." Slane got up scowling, moved restlessly about the room. "I don't like this gamblin' with the penitentiary, Jeff."

"Neither do I. But it was the only way I saw to get the Northern. I want that road."

"What for? What'll you have if you do git it? A hundred miles o' track, two hundred odd miles o' right of way, an' ten thousand enemies! That's all. There ain't any rollin' stock, except one wore-out engine an' two, three flat cars. There ain't a depot finished, or a mile o' spur track.

"To realize anything at all, you got to build one hundred an' twenty odd miles more, plumb through a howlin' wilderness, by December thirty-first of next year to meet the conditions of the Wisconsin land grant; an' you'd have to do it with no money in sight, an' no credit. You know that. You musta knowed it when you made your bid."

"I did," said Craig. "But I told you I wanted that road. I wanted it in the way a man wants a woman, so badly that I didn't give a damn about consequences. I wanted to take it away from those leeches that were sucking the life out of it, and make it what it could be. But don't let me get started on that. Finish your breakfast, Mike, and we'll go out and do the town."

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. . . Under other circumstances, Slane would have found the next two days pleasant enough. But he found no comfort in sightseeing now.

"I keep seein' things I ain't lookin' at," he confessed morosely, as they made their way back to the hotel early on the morning of the third day. "I keep seein' prison bars. Ain't Barstow ever goin' to show up?"

"I expect him tomorrow. Or rather today. It's morning now."

"You seem sure of everything," Slane grumbled. "How do you know he'll be around this mornin'? How do you know he even knows you're here, or cares?"

"I don't," said Craig. "I've told you it's all guesswork. The reason I expect him this morning, if at all, is that the draft is due this morning."

Slane said miserably: "I wish you hadn't told me that, Jeff. Fer two days now, I ain't et or drank enough to keep a sparrow alive. An' now I won't be able to sleep, either."

CHAPTER XVII

SHOWDOWN—MINUS ACES

HE DID have the appearance of a man who has spent a sleepless night when, at about ten, he entered Craig's room. His host interrupted his usual lavish breakfast to pour him a drink.

"Here. Take this. You'll need it, when you've heard what I have to tell you."

"What is it?" In his anxiety, Slane ignored the whiskey.

"I've just had word from the bank that the draft has arrived. It came in yesterday."

Slane sat down, suddenly. He said dismally: "Yesterday, huh? Then that does it. That cooks us. By now, it's been turned back. Now, it wouldn't do any good to put a million dollars in that bank."

"It's not been turned back yet, Mike. It came in late, and they're giving me until two o'clock this afternoon to make it good."

"That's a big help," Slane said. "It gives us four more hours to worry. Mebbe we kin worry ourselves to death. That way we'd keep outa jail."

He drank the whiskey. He rose, stood scowling down at Craig.

"Listen, Jeff," he said, in a strained, hesitant voice. "I ain't never been much of a hand to beg fer anythin', but I'm going to do it now. I'm goin' to beg you to come down off your high horse an' go find Barstow an' ask him to let you have that money. Give him the K. an' W., give him back the Northern—give him anything he's got to have, down to the shirt on your back or mine, to git it. It'll be hard, but not near as hard as a lot o' years in jail."

"Thanks, Mike." Craig put a hand on his arm, squeezed it affectionately. He knew how difficult that speech had been for the other. Surrender did not come easy to one of his kind. No threat to himself would have wrung it from him; nothing would, other than peril to a friend.

Craig said, and there was no flippancy in his voice now: "Going to him wouldn't get me anything, Mike. It would be the worst move I could make. He'd know then that I was beaten; he'd grind me into the ground. Wrong or right, I've got to play this out in the way I started."

"Yeah. Yeah. I guess I kin see that. Forgit it," Slane said gruffly.

"This is a complicated game," Craig went on. "More complicated than you know. I'd like to tell you all about it, but I can't, yet. I'll have to ask you to just hang around and see what happens. Maybe it will help if I tell you there's likely to be something more than a battle of words this time, if I'm right about Barstow and outguess him. He's a bad loser; he'll not relish the surprise I'd hand him."

"That does help. That helps a lot," said Slane. For the first time in days, he looked almost cheerful.

AT TWELVE Craig put aside the paper, yawned, stretched, then got up and began to dress. He was very deliberate, and Slane tried to distract himself by looking out of the window. But Slane had the unpleasant illusion that he was looking out of a narrow, barred window; and above all the city noises, he heard every tick of the gilt-and-ivory clock. It stood just at one when Craig swung away from a fastidious final inspection of his tall, broad-shouldered, immaculately-clad figure.

"Dinner time, Mike," he said.

"Yuh," said Slane; but the thought of food revolted him. He guessed that Craig, too, must have lost hope by now, though nothing in his voice or face betrayed him.

They went into the hall, and down the broad marble stair. Near the first landing, Slane saw Craig falter in his stride and stop; and following his glance, Slane grew rigid too. That part of the stairway commanded a view of the front portion of the hotel dining room; and at one of the tables Barstow was sitting. Facing him, with his back to the door, was Granville, and to his right, Milton Wycliffe. Opposite him was Ann.

She was slim, very lovely in a high-waisted blue dress, her fine small head and delicate, regular profile outlined with a stamped clarity against the light from the high French windows.

Craig's eyes were on her with a frowning intentness; and Slane could guess that it was her presence there, not Barstow's, that had startled him. All along he must have been certain he would find Barstow in that dining room.

He recovered quickly from his surprise, and went on down the stairway and into the dining room. He chose a table across the room from that occupied by Barstow's party, and sat down with his back to them.

Mike sat opposite, then immediately wished he had not. He was afraid he might betray the anxiety he felt in the narrowing margin of time remaining to two o'clock—to the time when that draft would be turned back. He was famous for his poker face; but he had never sat in on a game like this before.

HE AVOIDED looking directly at Barstow's party, but he could see enough to cheer him somewhat. Granville was frankly uneasy, Wycliffe nervous or impatient, as was his niece, who turned full around several times to look at them. Barstow, looking calm, detached as Craig himself, was engaging her in intimate conversation. Presently both rose and approached; the two other men drifted out into the lobby.

Barstow nodded to Slane; said to Craig, pleasantly: "Glad to see you. Been here long?"

"Five days." Craig had risen. He held a chair for Ann, and she accepted it. But Barstow remained standing.

"If you don't mind, I'll take my cigar outside," he said. He gave the girl a significant look, went out into the lobby.

Craig sat down. He was eyeing Ann intently, but his gaze was remote, unfriendly. She seemed uneasy under it,

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and began to talk, in a random, nervous way: "It's been a long time since I've seen you. You haven't been in Lakehead at all since the railroad dance, have you?"

"No," said Craig.

He could do nothing to help her. She was obviously disconcerted by his manner, but she tried again:

"We've had no dances this winter. This trip is Uncle's present to me, because I've been nowhere in months."

"Indeed?" said Craig. He gave a sudden, curt laugh. "Miss Wycliffe, why not say what you came to say, without all these painful preliminaries?"

She was startled. "Say what? I don't know what you mean."

"Perhaps I can help you to remember. You know that I've bought the Wisconsin Northern?"

"Of course," she said. "Everyone knows that."

"Do you happen to know the details of that sale? Has anyone been talking about it to you recently?"

"Yes," she said. "Mr. Barstow was talking about it just now. He said you were in a critical position; that you'd given your draft for far more money than you had in the bank, and that you might go to prison for it."

Craig studied her.

"Is that all he said? Did he suggest that you do something toward relieving my unfortunate position—possibly by pointing out to me the error of my ways?"

She hesitated; said finally: "Yes, he did say something like that. He said that even though you had behaved disgracefully in taking the Northern away from us, he would try to help you if he could—well, because he thought it might please me. But I didn't want to tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because of something you said to me once. You asked me not to form conclusions about you or anyone else connected with the railroad until it was all through. I am trying to do that."

"Thank you," said Craig.

She said, in a low, distressed tone: "It's hard, though. And it's getting harder all the time. Because you outbid us on that railroad, it looks now as if all of us who invested in it would lose everything we possess; and it doesn't help any to know that you made the bid without money enough to cover it. It is difficult to see how anything could happen that would make that seem right."

Mike Slane stirred protestingly. What words would convince her that Barstow, Granville, her own uncle had engineered nothing but a gigantic swindle? His mind reverted to its deeper concern, and surreptitiously he slid his heavy silver watch out of his waistcoat pocket He had just time to see that it pointed to seventeen minutes of two, when Barstow reappeared, compelling him to replace it hastily.

"Your uncle is asking for you in the lobby, Ann," Barstow said. He eyed her closely as she rose to leave, but apparently failed to read anything there; for he showed a moment's uncertainty seating himself in the chair she vacated. But then, seeming to arrive at some sudden decision, he began, with an air of apparent frankness:

"Craig—let's quit bluffing. You're not here just to see the town. You want money: five hundred thousand dollars. But you haven't got that much. You could scarcely have raised a fifth that sum."

"I haven't raised any," Craig said.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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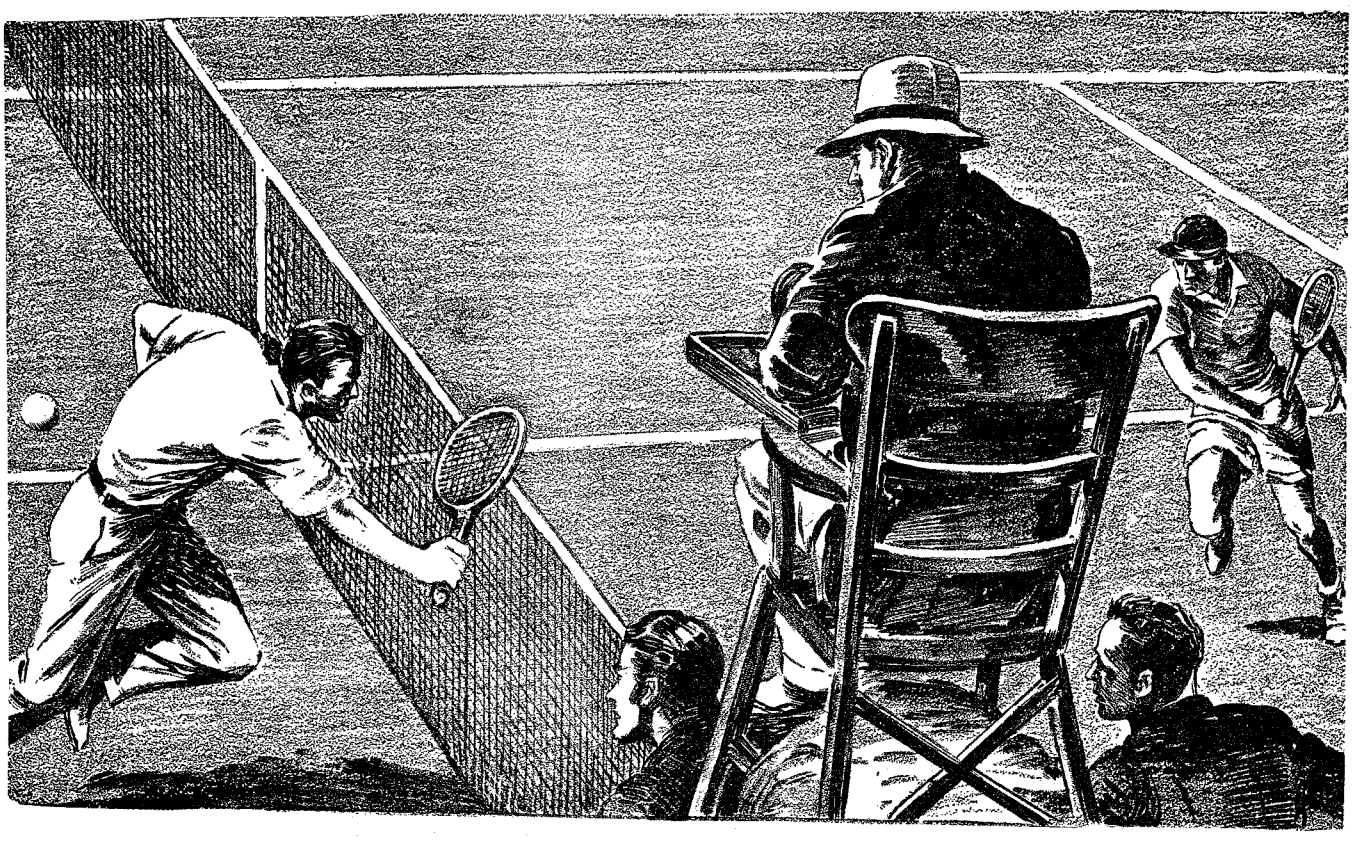

I lobbed his serve back at him, hard, and he never had a chance to touch it

Man Bites Champ

By William R. Cox

Author of "The Gloves Hang High," etc.

Once upon a time there was a guy who was sure he could double-cross his way to the championship. And why not—with nobody to stop him but a kid fresh out of college?

TIM BRADY was sweating blood. That cross-court swing gets big buys like Brady every time. I came into a weak return of my backhand drive and dropshotted him. Poor Brady almost broke his back getting up there.

He tapped it up, trying to cross-foot me. I reached out and nailed it to the line. The umpire said, "Game, set and match to Mr. David Marlowe!"

Tim shook hands the way tennis players do, without much more warmth than an infuriated clam. I said, "Tough luck, champ."

I call them all "champ." Tim was sixth ranking player, but I wasn't ranked at all. I had been the intercollegiate champion, but Dad never let me go to the tournaments until I graduated last June. That was why I'd had only a year and a couple of months of real tournament tennis until the Nationals. That was what upset everyone when I beat Brady.

Six newspapermen asked how it felt to come unheralded to the Nationals at famed Forest Hills and get through to the semi-finals. I said it felt like I had been playing a hell of a lot of tennis and maybe Dad was right. After they left, Ben Wise came over and put his arm around me and led me away.

That burned a lot of them. Ben Wise was the real champ. He'd won for two years at Forest Hills; this was his third crack, and if it weren't for Red Corcoran, this would be a walkaway, too. No one but Red seemed to have the slightest chance against Ben's rock-like steadiness.

Ben isn't very big—just about my size, which is medium. He has black hair and snapping black eyes and a tight, small mouth. He is a very cocky gent; in fact, until I beat Corcoran at Seabright, Ben had never noticed me.

I'd had a good day at Seabright. Red was storming the net and blasting away, that style of his showing off fine. Red is a tremendous hitter and always looks like a million out there. He never misses by much; but at Seabright he was missing enough. He blew so many shots he beat himself.

Ben Wise didn't see the match and everyone said that Red was "on." Some said it because it made a good story, me winning. The others said it because they were not in love with Ben Wise.

So Ben began paying attention to me, inviting me around with him and his girl, Mary Howe—a knockout blonde. When she found I could do a real rhumba on account of my year with Dad in Cuba, we were set. Ben used to play a lot of poker, so he started to let me sub in for him with Mary.

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Maybe I wouldn't have put up with Ben if it hadn't been for Mary. He gave orders. He never made a request in his life. At least, not after he became tennis champion he didn't. He got to looking upon me as a stooge. Pretty soon I was supposed to laugh every time he opened his mouth.

Still, he taught me plenty of tennis. He never knew how much he taught me. I got more practice with him than with anyone I ever played with except one guy—the fellow who started me to playing seriously.

IT SEEMS that this year there was a job with a sporting goods company, and if Ben won, he would get the job, and then he could marry Mary Howe and live happily ever after. He was almost living the part, except he put on too much, trying to fraternize with people he hadn't spoken to in years, patting the backs of tennis players who hated his guts and things like that.

Of course if Red Corcoran won the title they would offer him the job. Ben knew it; and although Red had never been able to beat Ben in a national tournament, the champ was really worried.

Red had the power of Budge, the steadiness of Grant—except at intervals. Then something happened to his timing and hi sshots went out by fractions; but out. He could recover from these spells against anyone but Ben.

One smart coach said it was because Red pressed too hard, that the human system could stand only just so much pressure, then you paid off for awhile until reserve strength came to you. Anyway, Ben could hold back enough to take full advantage of Red's lapses, especially when the chips were down. Ben was cold and tough in the clutches and no one could take that away from him.

So, after the Brady match, there we were in the locker room, Ben sitting on the bench while I dragged off the sweaty clothes. He said, "Tomorrow you play Corcoran. You can beat him, Dave."

I said, "You think so?"

Ben said in that positive way, "You beat him at Seabright. You can do it now. You've had advantage of my coaching, now."

I said, "Good coaching, too."

"Of course." Ben waved his hand. "Look, kid. I got to play Mansfield tomorrow. How about taking care of Mary for a little while, so she doesn't get lonely?"

I knew all about the crap game in Brady's rooms that night, but I said, "Sure, Ben."

He said, "I'll see you about ten for a warm-up. I've got to get you set for Corcoran. But I know you'll beat him. It'll be you and me in the finals, kid."

What an honor! Unranked player to meet world champion in finals of national championships in the Stadium. Dave Marlowe bows in gallant defeat by reigning star, Ben Wise!

I went to the showers whistling very happily.

MARY said, "Hello!" She was wearing green. You know—a blonde wearing green? Ah! We went over to the Club Miranda and took a small table. Mary said, "I hope Ben wins in the crap game."

I said, "Now this new conga step is a honey. You sorta bend over and make your hips do loops. You know?"

"I'll learn," said Mary. . . .

Red Corcoran came in about eleven and said, "Hey! I thought we were playing a match tomorrow!"

Red is an even six feet and handsome. Even his freckles are good-looking. I said, "You big stiff, I'll run you off the courts!"

Red said, "How about a dance, Mary?"

I watched them go around the floor, Mary looking up into his face and giving him that big smile and the two of them just about moving their feet. I began to get nervous. After the dance was over, I said, "We better go now, Mary. I have to play this baboon tomorrow."

Red said, "I'll ride out with you, if you don't mind. I need some sleep, too. You beat me last time, youngster, and I haven't forgotten it."

I said, "You don't have to spread that stuff around here. We know all about you losing at Seabright. You're among friends, Red."

He laughed and while I drove Ben's convertible, he kept Mary's attention. That's what good looks does for a man. My dad always says I was lucky to be born smart instead of handsome, but I doubt it sometimes.

I saw Mary into her place, then Red and I took a short ride. We got home before midnight and I slept until ten. Boy, I mean I pounded my ear, too. I knew what it meant to play Red Corcoran.

I WAS late meeting Ben and he was in a bad humor. We practiced and he gave me hell every minute. You could always get the ball against Ben, except when the chips were down. He just kept running you until he needed an important point. Then he could clip that ball and smash it to a line like Red Corcoran himself.

But Ben wasn't a gambler. He played it safe all the way. When he hit one, he had you out of position, or winded, or outguessed. It was not spectacular, but it was good tennis.

I quit after I got the sweat started. He tried to make me practice some serves, but I had enough. I'm not very big; my wiriness will take me just so far, and I know it.

Red was practicing with Brady, and it is not ethical to stand and gawk at your opponent of the day, but I took a quick gander. I saw enough as Ben and I walked past. Red never looked at us, he was so busy working out that backhand.

Ben Wise said, "You saw it, didn't you?"

I said, "Sure I saw it."

"He's off a bit on the backhand," said Ben. His black eyes were snapping at me. "He's been off all week with it. All you got to do is stick the ball down the flat and keep pressing him. You can beat him, I tell you!"

Ben wanted me to win so bad he could taste it. I never knew until then that he was scared of Red in that tournament. I guess he figured the law of averages was about to catch up with him. Red had never done it before; now was his time. I guess Ben was pretty desperate. He didn't have any money behind him, and that job with the sporting goods company meant everything to him.

All through lunch he kept talking to me, telling me what to do. Mary ate with us. She saw he was getting me rammy and stopped him after we had finished eating.

I managed to get away from them and went up to the room I was using over at the club. There was a telegram from Dad and a couple of letters. I read them lying on the bed. Dad's telegram was brief. Just said, "Cream him, boy. I'll be in at the death."

Well, soon enough it was time, and I went over to the Stadium. That place is terrific, with those seats piled up like a football stadium, and all those eyes staring down at you.

Red was used it it. I never played on the number one court before in my life. Last year I got whacked out in the second round and before that I never even saw Long Island. But I had to go out there and face Red, right before everybody.

Red wore immaculate flannels and a white shirt with the Davis Cup insignia on it. He looked like a million. I wore my little old shorts and a cotton shirt to absorb the sweat and a cap with a visor. The sports writers said I was the worst dressed player in tennis.

A-7-26

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Red and I rallied and I didn't give him any backhand. Why should I let him practice the faulty shots?

Red was wise to that. When we spun rackets, he said, "Benny the Bum teaches you tricks, eh, kid?"

I won the spin. I said, "I'll serve to you, chump."

Ben Wise was sitting on the player's bench, leaning forward, staring at us. He had to play later, but that didn't worry him. His hopes were riding on me, that day. He didn't want to meet that Red in the finals, backhand or no backhand.

He was right. Red was funny in a lot of ways. If he was off, and still beat me, he might come back and be hot tomorrow. He never had beaten Ben; but on the other hand he was not the champion and therefore had everything to gain and nothing to lose. Ben knew the percentages.

I PRACTICED a couple and Red banged a couple of those cannonball serves of his. Then it got awful quiet, so that I stared around. The officials all looked solemn as goats. Everybody held his breath. The umpire said sonorously, "This is a semi-finals match, etc. etc. etc. . . ." Then he said ominously, "Mr. Marlowe serving. Play!"

I almost forgot to serve, the thing was so impressive. But I finally got the ball up there and hit it with that twist, not too hard. It went good, to Red's backhand.

He shot it back, flat down the line. I stood and drove deep to the backhand corner. I'm about the same off either side, so I could mask the ball pretty good. Red cut it off, hit hard and came in, the way he does.

I had to move up. I hit sharply, cutting under a little. The spin took in the grass and the ball stood up, still on Red's backhand. He took the chance and aimed at the cross-court line. He missed.

I kept after him and won the game. As we changed, I took a look at Ben Wise. He was sitting back, laughing and saying something to Brady.

Red won his service with two aces thrown in to make me look bad. And I won mine.

We went to four all. Red was battering away, making shots that had the crowd on the edge of their seats. I hit him another twister. He came in, took the serve on the rise, hammering at me. I retreated and short-lobbed. He backed and hammered with the overhead. I ran back ten feet and lobbed again. He really had me. He pounded to the forehand corner.

I had to run. I got over fast and bent my knees. I drove with all I had off the top-spin bounce of his shot.

He was coming in, expecting another lob. He was caught. The average tennis player wouldn't even try for that one.

But Red stretched about nine feet. He swung with that long arm. He chopped and the ball cleared the net, hit almost dead in forecourt.

I was up there, waiting. I knew that Red. He could beat you with those miracle shots. I trapped the ball and cut it on the angle. It hit the line and I was saved again. I ran out that game quick, after that.

Red couldn't get the cannonball going. He was fighting me and himself, now. I won the tenth game and the set.

Red won the next set at 6-2, flailing me with his speed and change of pace and those grand drives of his. Ben Wise still joked on the bench, but was crowd was restless. We were playing pretty good tennis and very even.

I got the third set, playing Red's backhand for all it was worth. But at the end of the last game that backhand was coming in again and I had to make a couple of placements to run it out.

The intermission was good. I had a shower and changed clothes and felt fine. I wasn't tired a bit. As we went out, Red said, "You're playing too damned well."

HE STARTED out blistering that backhand all over the place. It had come back, all right. I played safe and he had to come to me. When he did, I passed him.

I still don't know how I did it. There is a little hole about a foot square in which to pass a guy like Red when he is charging you. One inch either way and you're done. Either he cuts it off or it's out of bounds. And when you're shooting for that hole it's not off an easy ball, either. Not when Red's booming them over.

I bet I slipped a hundred of them in there. It got to be five four and my serve and I was shaking like a leaf inside. This was it. I couldn't go another set against that speed and that stamina which Red threw out of his big body.

I switched and threw him a hard, flat serve to his forehand. He lunged at it, surprised. I came in and nailed it on the volley. I drilled it for the far corner and that was one point.

He stared at me and said, "Stealing my stuff, kid?"

I couldn't answer. I was almost bushed. I gave him the twister, again to his forehand. He slammed it and I rallied with him, three, four times keeping them deep and half-speed. He backhanded a vicious one but I was ready and waiting and cross-courted to his forehand. His shot hit the tape hesitated, fell back. That was two for me.

The stillness had fallen on the crowd again. Red Corcoran was still the number two ranking player—and I was unseeded, unranked and unknown.

I put a lot into the next service. I was getting my first one in every time. This hit the line and knocked Red onto his heels. He tried to make a shot, but I trapped a half-volley and made a dropshot fluke.

That was forty love. Red frowned and gripped his bat. I bounced a ball, taking my time. Then I threw it up and dropped my racket down to my heels. I went all the way over and through on that service, like Elly Vines used to do. My heart and my guts rode down on it.

Red made a stab. Even then he got his racket on the ball. It came over the net and bounced up, a little sitter. I gave it the smooch and it rolled off my strings and stopped on the green grass—and I was into the finals of the Nationals!

Red hugged me. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat. He said, "Kid, that was mixing it up! I never saw so many different shots in my life."

I said, "You think it's good enough?"

"Too good for me!" said Red, and he meant it. He was a sincere big guy; you had to say that for him.

Ben Wise didn't come around. Not after the match, in the dressing room, not any time. Ben had accomplished his aim. He was to meet me tomorrow for the title. He had got rid of Red Corcoran.

That was all right with me. I understood how it was. I sent Dad a wire and ate a dinner fit for a couple horses and went to bed at nine o'clock. Playing that Red Corcoran takes the sap out of a guy.

I MET Dad at the plane. He frowned and said, "You ought to be practicing at this hour."

"I said, "G'wan. I been practicing."

"Today?"

I said, "Nope. All the time since Seabright."

He grinned. "Think you can take Ben Wise?"

I said, "You know damned well I can't take Ben Wise. He's good and he's smart and he's tough in the clutches."

Dad's not a big guy, but he's got a terrible voice. He roared, "You better be tough in the clutches! You can lose, but by Gad, if you miss in the clutches, I'll have you shot at sunrise!"

I said, "Okay, boss."

Everybody's always nice to Dad. They call him "Spike"

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even the tennis players. He is kind of spikey, at that: always kidding everyone, but watching them, too, with his sharp eyes.

I introduced him to Mary Howe and he said, "A blonde, huh? Dizzy as a top, I'll bet."

"Dizzier," said Mary gravely. "Can you blame me?"

Dad said, "No, I can't. How about sitting with me this afternoon? I've got two tickets."

Mary said, "Surely, Spike!"

So they were all right. Ben Wise came looking for Mary and he was undecided whether to be happy or sad, I guess. It was the first I had seen him and he said, "You certainly showed something yesterday. I thought you'd go five sets and have to fight extra games against Red."

I said, "You worried, Ben?"

He laughed. He said, "Anybody would worry."

When he had lugged Mary away, Dad said, "So that's Benny the Bum? I don't like him."

I said, "Nobody does. But he sure taught me a lot about tennis. Let's get me my weak tea and nothing-sandwich."

We ate and talked about this and that. Red came over and said, "Hey, Spike! What do you know about this ingrate son of yours?"

Dad said, "Sit down, Red. I want to talk to you."

Red sat down. He sure looked swell. He wasn't a bit downhearted or anything. He talked to Dad, and after a while I sneaked off and got a little nap. Nothing like some sleep before you play a guy like Ben Wise.

When I woke up, there was Ben, sitting alongside my bed, shaking me. I said, "Hey! What time is it?"

"Plenty of time. Look, Dave. How do you feel about this match?"

"I feel fine."

"You can't beat me," he said, and waited for me to answer, like something was on his mind.

I said, "That's the general opinion."

"You're young. Next year you'll win sure," said Ben.

I said, "And you've been pretty nice to me, haven't you, Ben?"

He looked a little surprised. He said, "Well—the thing is, I'd hate to lose."

I got up off the bed and reached for my pants. "Look, Ben. You never gave a sucker an even break in your life. Away back when you began playing tennis, you were tough. You were a hardboiled kid off the back streets. You fought everybody anyway you knew how. You cut the throat of guys who were nice to you. Am I right?"

Ben gave me the stony stare. "Look here, kid—"

I said, "I was intercollegiate lightweight champ, too. You want to make anything out of it?"

Ben said, "I was only—"

I said, "Go on down and get ready. And don't look for any favors from me."

He was pale, then. He said, "It's Mary. You fell for her, you young squirt. You've been playing me for a sucker. Right along, you've been double-crossing me."

I said, "You'd better get out, Ben."

He went to the door. Then he turned around and his face was different. "I'm going to show you something today, Dave. If you win one single point from me, pal, you'll be damned lucky."

I gave him the laugh as he clattered out. Then I sobered up and knew what I was up against. There would be no holds barred out there against Ben Wise today.

I'M STRUNG tight; I jitter. Everyone knows that about me. When I went down to the courts, Dad was with me, holding my arm in an easy grasp, saying, "Now, I know how you feel, Dave. Just try to relax a little."

Red Corcoran and Mary Howe drifted over. Red said, "Look, clown, what can he do to you? You've been beaten by him fifty times. Once more won't hurt much!"

Mary said, "May the best man win," and giggled.

That broke the strain. We all laughed and Ben came out, three minutes late, with five rackets under his arms. He ignored me, speaking politely to the others. He drew Mary to one side, very pointedly, and whispered in her ear.

Dad said, "It's your wagon from here on out. Hold it in the road, boy."

I went out there and it was worse than yesterday. The fuss and confusion and the officials with their badges and the linesmen—one every two feet, it seemed to me. And the most august umpire of all, glowering at me because I didn't rate the finals. How those guys hate the form-busters!

Ben came out and took his time about everything. He examined the net as if it were manufactured by the wrong company or something. He talked to the umpire, and to the linesmen. He played with his five identical rackets, picking one out with great care.

I fiddled around, having no one to talk to. Finally I went to the sideline and sat down. I must have wandered in my mind, because the next thing I knew they were calling my name.

There was Ben, out on the court, scowling and waiting to spin a racket. I got up and went over and the umpire said something about, "Don't be smart, youngster", and I didn't pay him any attention. I won the spin and elected to serve. Ben didn't speak directly to me and I ignored him as completely.

We rallied. Ben was hitting them crisp and down the middle. He had all the shots. If he had more power, I guess he would have been as good as Budge, or Vines, or anyone but Tilden. He was a tennis robot. It seemed when you played him that he could never miss.

I was overdriving, but that was nervousness. Ben sensed it and that gleam came into his eye. The umpire finally got out all his announcements and that hush fell and I went back to begin service.

I was just about to throw up the ball. Ben said, "Just a minute! Ball boy, pick up that piece of wood."

I had to unwind. The ball boy went out and stared around and finally he found it. Ben's eyes must have been good to see that matchstick!

I WAS mad, but I had to hold it in. I served. Ben hit it back, deep and hard to backhand. I cut across with a floater, but Ben handles them all alike, speed and soft ones. The ball kept coming back and coming back.

There is only one way to play Ben Wise. Ben is no sucker for anything. You just have to outsteady him. And that is only the first step.

I got the rhythm of his swing and matched strokes with him. I played him up and down and across the courts. I won my service, too.

He held his service. I held mine. We went to five all that way. I was warmed up by then, and feeling pretty good. I went in and began to smash a little. I held. Then I broke him and won the first set.

I guess everybody in the Stadium but Ben and me was surprised. Well, maybe a couple of other people were not exactly floored, but the odds had been even that I wouldn't take a set.

I started to serve the second set. I put my reverse to the backhand corner, making it jump into Ben's face. He fell away and made a good shot. I settled down and drove deep. He put it back sharp across court, but I was there. I had played him so much, I knew his stuff. I anticipated pretty well and was saving myself.

We went to four apiece again. Ben stopped playing

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then for a moment. He tied a shoelace and walked around a little and stared at the sky. Then he looked abused and waited.

I served. He hit to forehand. I drove one to the backline. Ben didn't even try for it, just walked over to the odd court. The umpire droned, "Fifteen, Mr. Marlowe."

Ben stood up straight. He walked over and looked at the backline. He glared at the linesman, who blared back. Ben dropped his racket suggestively, pointing to a spot two inches outside the line. The linesman said, "That ball was right on it."

Ben shrugged, his dark face gloomy. I served. He batted it back. I returned. He hit sharp cross-court. I tried to meet him. He came up like a swallow to the net and put my return away.

This was the second part. I hit another ball on the line. Ben played it, but took brief time to glare at the linesman. I tried to pass him as he came in, but he beat me to the punch and put it away.

Again I hit that back line. I was shooting awful close, but you have to against Ben, or you're licked. This time the linesman hesitated, but clamped his mouth shut. Ben held up his hand and said to the umpire, "Really, sir, this is too bad! He missed one, and now he can't make up his mind."

The linesman got red as a beet and muttered something. Ben said sweetly, "You needn't curse me, sir."

Well, they had to change linesmen, then. The man was so mad he couldn't see straight. He walked off, walked back, swore at Ben. Ben played humble. He was cute that way.

Meantime, I was cooling off. I walked around, then I went up and got the towel and put it around me. But I couldn't keep warm. We started to play again and Ben ran out the set without any trouble.

The third set was altogether different. He seemed to forget everything but the play. And he wasn't steadying down on that backline. He was all over the court. I couldn't get the offensive to save my life.

I had learned all about Ben in the practice sessions which had been designed to beat Red Corcoran. But by the same business, Ben had learned all about me. He won that third set and we went to the rest period with him leading me, two to one.

DAD and Red were there, rubbing me down, toweling me off after my shower. They didn't say much. Red remarked, "He's giving you the works."

"Yeah," I said.

Dad shook his head. "That's nothing. I don't like the guy, but he's playing the better tennis."

I agreed with that. Red winked at me. He's the greatest guy for keeping cool. I winked back at him.

I heard Ben, down at the other end of the lockers, saying, "One set will do it. He's not very game, you know. He's a front runner."

That was for me to hear. That was to make me mad. I laughed and we went out there again. Mary was outside, and she waved encouragement to me. I never saw a prettier gal.

Ben was very condescending to everyone. He strutted around and was polite. He apologized to the umpire for his trouble with the linesman. He was the champ again, showing off. We began to play.

That fourth set was a diller. The rest, and the way I had paced myself, and everything else that went into it, gave me some extra speed. I ran him off the court, 6-0.

You never saw such a change in a man. He began to scream at the ball boys. He stalled. He cut capers on every close shot. The umpire finally got sick and warned him, but Ben's politeness was all gone. He was fighting now, with every weapon he had.

He changed rackets twice. Then we went into the last set and there it was, with the championship riding. I had been hitting hard and making everything. In the last set we held service right along. Ben wasn't giving a point once he got the idea it wasn't a pushover. And when he got going again, he was tougher than ever.

He went back to steady play, then. I had to fight myself to keep from pressing too hard. I matched him, stroke for stroke. That I had learned from him.

We came to five all, to six all. I was serving the odd game. I took the balls and stood a minute, staring over at Ben.

His face was twisted into a knot, but it wasn't all weariness. He was killing mad. Ben had the quality of rising to heights. I knew when I looked at him that this was it. If he could break me now, he'd win. He knew it, and well I knew it.

I served. He slammed at it, and it was good on the backhand. He came in, expecting me to match his stroke. I pivoted and threw everything I had into a cross-court placement. He reached out his racket, but I was past him with it. He wheeled and stared. The ball clipped the line.

He wanted to squawk, but right then he lost his nerve. He looked at the linesman, but didn't say anything. He went to the odd court to receive.

I gave him the flat one, with little bounce. He had to hit it up. He tried to make a shot of it, but I followed it in. I put it away, too.

HE GOT me on the next one. It was thirty-fifteen. Then I got everything together and hit my Vines service. It caught him flatfooted. Forty-fifteen.

He moved his feet, waiting the next one. I had him unsettled with that mixed service I had used on Red when the chips were down. I went through the motions. Then I handed him a soft one which barely cleared the net.

He came storming in. He fired away with both barrels at it—and knocked it across the court in a beautiful forehand cut shot.

It missed. It was only out an inch, but it was game to me; and we changed courts.

He said, "You're the luckiest soandso. . ."

I laughed at him and went back to receive. I'd been taking his service only fairly well. He had a nice, full-swinging shot with plenty of top-spin. It bounced high and I'd been safe-playing it deep as I could.

He threw it at me. I took it at the top of the bound. I didn't safety the shot. I hit with a screwy sort of pivoting of my whole body. I hit for the line and I got it. He pooped to me as I came in. I smash-volleyed at his feet and he was helpless.

He still didn't catch on, smart as he was. He held to that top-spin service. Again I hit the freak shot. It was unorthodox, but it certainly was going good. Again he had to return short. I drove him back with a corner shot, then went in and put the drop on him. It was love-thirty and Ben got white as a ghost.

He also got smart. He gave me a low, flat service. I tacked it on his backhand and he tried me deep. I went over and canted it to the cross-court corner with all my strength.

I was hitting twice as hard as before. He came in, trying to overwhelm me with speed. I shoved one down the line. It went through that little hole. Ben fell down trying to reach it.

I went up to the net. He rolled over on the grass, making faces. They came out and rubbed his ankle. They even sent for a bandage.

Again I was cooling off. Also, my nerves were tightening up something terrible. I walked in a circle. Then I ran.

That was a swell idea. I ran around and around the

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court, on my side of the net. That was swell. I kept right on running. Ben stalled and stalled, and I ran and ran, nice and easy, keeping warm. People in the stands started to laugh and a big voice boomed, "Bell lap!"

That was Dad's voice. I laughed, looking up at him. Mary was up there, and Red Corcoran, too. I waved at them. Ben limped back to position.

He served. He threw that big, old top-spin again and came dashing in behind it. He figured to catch me thinking his ankle wouldn't stand it. He figured on that old over-confidence stuff. He was very smart, that cookie.

I pulled the pivot on him. I laid it down flat, this time, just for a change. I laid into it with all I had, booming for that back-line.

He stood there, his face white. He didn't even look to see if it was good. He heard the umpire saying,

"Game, set and match to David Marlowe!"

THAT made me the national champion. That made Ben a runner-up. He stood there and hated me. I was almost scared of the way he hated me.

The photographers came and the officials and everyone, but Dad got me away finally. We were all in the dressing room, huddled into a corner. Ben came over, his face still terrible with rage. He shouted, "You double-crossing little rat! You—"

Red grabbed him. Red picked him right off the floor and shook him, hard. Dad bristled around, but I said;

"Don't bother about him. Red's been waiting for this for years. He dirtied up on Red when they were juniors. He stole Mary from Red, telling her lies about him. Then he thought he'd use me to beat Red out of the tournament, so that he could run me ragged out there in the finals."

Dad laughed. "He doesn't know Red taught you to play tennis?"

I said, "He don't even know Red used to live in our town. He's not so smart, really. He don't know Red has fed me a thousand of those high-bounching top-spin services, and that I saved that shot for the payoff."

Ben Wise was against a locker, trying to get himself together I said to him, "Look, Ben, why don't you get smart? You double-crossed Red a hundred times. You tried to get him barred for taking too much expense money. You undermined him with the sporting goods companies. You accused him of selling rackets given him to play with—and it was you who did that stunt. Then you told Mary that stuff about him.

"Now between us, Red and I have got even. Why don't you give up? You can have that job, because Red don't want it. Red's going to work for Dad and marry Mary, which he should have done a year ago."

Ben choked on it. But he said, "Okay. I'm licked."

"That's obvious," said Dad in that voice. "Why don't you apologize?"

So Ben did. Then he went away. Then Dad said, "At that, you practiced deceit on the lad. . . ."

But he had to grin. It spread from ear to ear. He was pretty proud all right.

He was proud because Red was his favorite, and because he needed Red on a job in the plant. He was proud because Red would marry Mary, who had captured his fancy. He was proud that his son had won the championship.

Me? I wasn't so proud. Mary hasn't got a sister!

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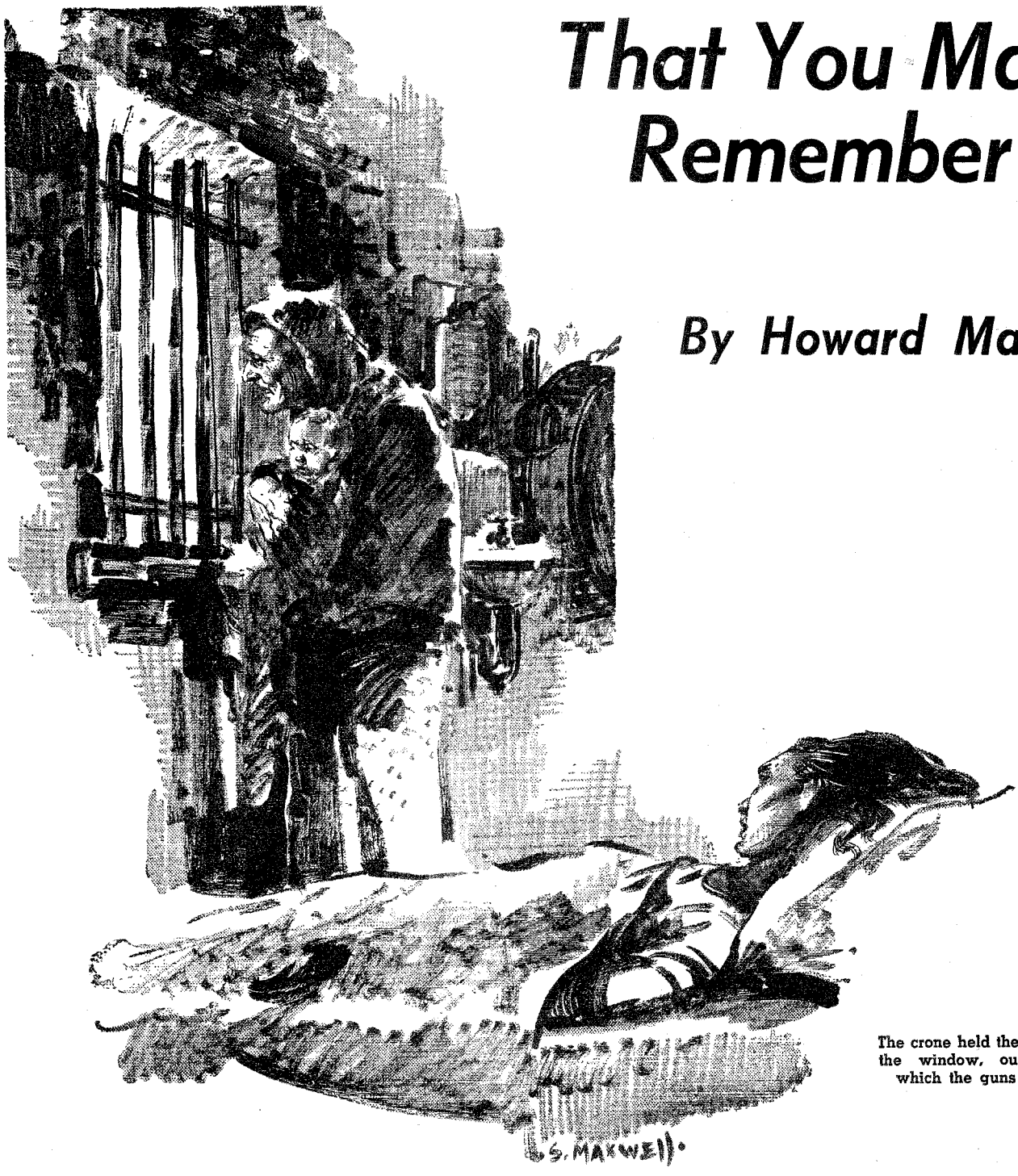
That You May Remember

By Howard Maier



The crone held the child to the window, outside of which the guns rolled

SOMEONE, she knew not who, had taken the sharp piece of glass, a broken fragment of a bottle, from where she had hidden it in the hem of her skirt. Before that someone had taken the little pearl-handle revolver. Whoever it might be was determined that she should not die by her own hand.

In return she had refused all food for the past three days; and would refuse it for the next three, and the next, and on and on for as long as it was offered to her. Then there would come an end, an end to this nightmare.

Three days before she had given birth to a child—a son, a male for the line of Champenelle, born amid the horrors of a concentration camp, born in solitude and pain, attended by one old woman.

Therese de Champenelle turned on the bed of rough planks and regarded the old woman sitting in the corner of the hovel. All of seventy, she had the face of a witch, with mad eyes that stared from deep-sunk sockets. She sat motionless, clad from head to toe in filthy rags, staring at the mother and the child. There was a brooding, hating light in her eyes.

She hates me, thought Therese, with a hate so fierce it consumes her. It is there in her eyes for all to see. Why then does she continue to care for me? She has been here from the beginning; she must know that I do not wish to live. It must be she who has taken the glass and the revolver. No one else in this camp of horror would bother; no one else had ever entered their hut.

Wearily Therese closed her eyes. This war, she thought, this mad, terrible, useless war. But for the war she would be safe in Paris. There would be a nurse in starched white. Two nurses. Armand would see to that. What had they done to deserve this? Nothing. Armand had gone to the Foreign Office as he had always gone. And she? She had run his house as she had always run it.

Suddenly her brain went numb with realization. Armand was gone! Dead! He had said that they would be safe. That all had been arranged for their kind of people. Ar-

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ranged. Arranged. Who then had arranged that day on the road when he lay with his head in her lap, riddled by the bullets of the invader? At the very last he had attempted to explain to her, but the blood had filled his mouth . . .

The baby at her side stirred and Therese pressed him closer to her own warmth. She became conscious of eyes boring down on her shut lids. Startled, she opened her eyes. The old woman stood over her. Her face was full of hate. The eyes were as fierce as any wild animal's; shreds of dank hair hung from beneath a turban of sacking.

A half-smothered exclamation of fear escaped Therese's lips. "Get out!" she managed to say. "Leave me in peace."

The aged woman grunted and without a word padded softly back to her corner.

THERESE struggled up on one elbow. "What have you done with the little revolver, old one?" she asked coaxingly. "Where have you put it?"

From the corner came no answer.

"Perhaps they have taken it from you?" said Therese, using the soft voice with which one addresses the insane.

Still no answer from the corner.

"But the little piece of glass," wheedled Therese. "The little piece of green glass, you have it still?"

Only a shifting glitter on the surface of the mad eyes answered her.

"You hate me, old one, do you not?" Therese shuddered as the wild eyes in the corner glowed. "Then give me the revolver and you can watch me die. It will pleasure you, no? Afterward you can take the child to an address I will give you. They will give you thousands of francs. Only now give me the tiny revolver, yes?" The woman did not move. "Or the piece of glass," coaxed Therese. "The little piece of green glass."

The child at her side awakened and whimpered fretfully.

"Silence!" commanded the crone from her corner.

Therese quieted the baby, pressing him against her side, feeling the tiny hands grope blindly at her arm. Silence fell on the rough shack. Through half-shut lids Therese watched the old woman. She sat like a mummy in her rags, her eyes glazed as though hypnotized, fixed as always upon the woman and the child . . .

There came a scraping sound from outside the flimsy door and a hand thrust a bowl through the aperture. Without words the old crone took it and brought it across to the bed.

"It is time to eat," she said expressionlessly, holding out the bowl. The odor of warm food crept up Therese's nostrils. She locked her teeth and pressed back into her pillow away from the tempting bowl.

The old hag said, "Eat."

"Take it away, witch!" cried Therese. "I want none of it!"

The woman shrugged and dipped the spoon full of the greasy stuff and held it within an inch of Therese's nose. The foul smell filled her head, tor down her throat and twisted at her stomach. Against her will she felt her teeth unlocking, her mouth slowly opening. With a sharp cry of distress, she twisted in the bed and knocked the spoon from the hag's hand. It fell to the floor with a dull thud.

Laboriously the old woman stooped and retrieved it. She filled it and held it out again. "Eat," she said, her eyes glowing.

Therese silently turned her face to the wall. Why will she force it on me? She hates me. Gladly would she tear me limb from limb. She is indeed mad. The entire world is mad.

She heard the woman place the bowl of food on the one narrow shelf; heard her muttering to herself, and then caught the soft pad of the rag-wrapped feet as they returned to the corner.

SLOWLY, in the quiet, the light that filtered through the chinks in the loose boarding died away. The hut filled with shadows. A rat raced across the earthen floor, making a dry scuffling sound. The babe at Therese's side was still, the little mouth opening and shutting in sleep.

Off beyond the hundreds of derelict huts that rimmed the hard-packed exercise ground, a gong sounded. Once. Twice. Light from the giant searchlights flooded the grounds, shooting through the one small window. From the distance came the measured beat of a muffled drum.

The fingers of Therese's hands gripped at the edges of the bed. Now she could distinguish the whisperings of thousands of tongues from outside the hut, the shuffling of countless feet. She knew that at the sound of the gong the prisoners gathered, as they were forced to gather, to witness the nightly executions. Now all was still.

In the hushed silence that seemed to hold the universe, she heard the slow shuffle of the crone's feet approaching. The tap of a finger on her shoulder fillled her with an unknown dread.

"Come," said the high-pitched voice. "Give me the child."

"No!" cried Therese, shielding the baby with her shoulder.

"Quickly! It is about to begin."

The old woman had the strength of three. Easily she loosened the mother's weak grip and lifted the child from the bed. He cooed softly and reached out tiny hands to the toothless mouth.

The drum rolled sharply. The old woman threw open the window and held the baby swaddled in her shawl up into the full glare of the light. Instantly the child put up two tiny pink fists to shield his eyes. With horror Therese watched the gnarled work-stained hands gently but inexorably pull down the small ones, again, and again.

There came the ragged, tearing sound of the volley. The baby's mouth opened to a circle; one pink foot kicked aside the shawl.

Again the drum rolled. Again the tearing volley.

"Those you now see die, son of Champenelle," said the old one into the child's ear, "are Frenchmen. Even as you are French." The guns fired again. "Hear them, son of Champenelle. See how they fall, and remember it for as long as you shall live.

"Your father was a traitor. A soft, bungling traitor. Dead now, killed by the hands of those to whom he sold France. Your mother would take her own life. She too is soft, a useless thing. But all that matters to you is this —that you are French."

Fiercely she held the baby up into the light while the last volley jarred and echoed through the hut.

"This war will cease as other wars have ceased; peace will come as peace always comes. Then, once again, France will have liberty. Once again Frenchmen in high places will grow soft with easy living and liberty become a thing to be mouthed about, not lived." She trembled with suppressed fury; her voice broke. "And once again soft Frenchmen will attempt to betray that liberty! But you, son of Champenelle the traitor, born of softness into hardness, shall be its guardian. For tonight you have seen how men deprived of liberty die. See to it, hard one to be, that never again in the days to come shall Frenchmen be betrayed, to die in vain, their backs to a wall!"

Only silence came from outside now. The old woman shut the window and brought the child back to the bed. Her eyes were ablaze with the fire of some inner exaltation. Fearfully Therese watched her take the bowl from the shelf. The gnarled hand dipped the spoon full and thrust it out at her.

"Eat!" commanded the old woman. "Eat—or I force you! This child must have milk. He must live."

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Forward Into Battle

By Charles Marquis Warren

CHAPTER XXXV

HOUNDS OF HAVOC

SCOTTO THORGENSEN chose a hilltop overlooking Route 117 and climbed up, lugging the automatic rifle and the leather bag containing the automatic rifle pans, only to find that the small flat top of the hill was already occupied by a machine gun squad and signal corps men with their field telephone and short-wave radio.

The corporal in charge of the machine gun squad looked up at him, grunting, "Set it up, guy. You know how to shoot it?" His face was loose and white with excitement.

Scotto shook his head. "No," he said. He got to his knees, adjusting the gun on its tripod, swinging it tentatively. "It won't take me long to learn."

"The hell it won't."

The corporal got up and came over and inspected the light automatic rifle with its ventilated barrel and blunt unwieldy stock.

"That thing'll bounce you around like a rattle unless you know how to ride it." He gathered it up in his arms and carried it past the machine gun emplacement and set it up four feet from the gun. He grunted to one of his men. "Vince, take hold of this baby and work her. My God, the stuff they're giving us. The junk they're passing out. This baby's built to take a 9mm. pistol cartridge. This baby's good for breaking up strikes and riots; it won't chip the paint off a tank."

Scotto said, "The sergeant in the armory at Houston handed it to me. I guess because I looked big enough to ride it. They were giving anything to everybody."

The corporal swore.

"Junk. That's all they give us. The Regular Army's got everything that's any account. We take whats' left. Most of the guys I seen come up her lugged Enfields. One out of ten had Springfields. None of 'em ever heard of a Garand. I'm waitin' for some soda jerker to show up with a beebee rifle."

Scotto got up from his knees. He was feeling tight inside. But not frightened. There wasn't anything to be frightened about. That would come later. The noise that he heard was more exciting than dreadful That was because it was still a good ways off. When it came closer the fright would come with it.

BELOW AND AHEAD of him, as far as he could see, stretched the wide smooth band of Route 117. It ran that way for more than two hundred miles, level and curving imperceptibly, on into Maredo and across the bridge into Mexico where it became the International Highway.

The road was jammed with moving vehicles and men, speeding and crawling southwestward. They were the last of the Regular Army units, such as could be obtained and set on the move in the few short hours since the call had gone on. The first units were already a long ways up the road, where the noise was.

Like deadly petals they fell, their parachutes blooming

Turning, he looked behind. The road leading up to and past his hilltop was also jammed, but most of this traffic consisted of the Initial Protective Force. And it was something to see.

He had himself been a part of that heterogeneous column, moving out of Houston. Looking down he could see them now, marching, conveyed in army lorries, farm trucks and private automobiles.

Few of them were in uniform. There hadn't been that much time—or that many uniforms. In the sunlight their

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faces appeared wet and sallow. Their mouths were tight with excitement and a kind of bewildered determination. Those who rode in vehicles carried their rifles across their knees, or betwen them, straight up and down, their hands gripping them savagely; those who marched on the road-shoulders carried their guns awkwardly over either shoulder or held them as a hunter does his piece, in the middle. Many of the guns had bayonets attached; more did not.

As he watched, he found his breath coming a little more quickly. Something inside him hammered at him and spoke to him about these men.

They were salesmen and clerks; they were bookkeepers and restaurant owners; they were bellhops and bankers and stockbrokers; they were rowdy kids off Main Street and university students yanked from classrooms; they were youthfully-old men of fifty who owned factories and mercantile mills and ship lines on Galveston Bay; and WPA laborers and cattlemen and sheep ranchers who were used to the sun and the wind in their faces.

For a brief moment the thought came to him of another Initial Protective Force; men with the same faces, the same pallor of determination, armed with the same unpreparedness. That had been at a place called Concord and the Force had driven the invader clear back to Boston and bottled him up and forced him to flee. And here they were again, that same Force, later as the years go, but armed with the identical unpreparedness; carrying their Enfields and Tommy-guns and automatic rifles and hand grenades in place of muskets and powder horns and swords; but carrying them against a mechanicsm of moving and flying steel which would not be checked as had the invader at Concord on such a sun-hot day as this one.

He watched the pathetic activity of the Force as it scurried about, throwing up long barricades of dirt and hastily filled sandbags, digging shallow trenches which crossed the highway and stretched along gray-brown sandy earth as far to either side as he could see.

This would be the Force's stand. With Houston and Galveston at its back there was no choice of battlefields and advantageous positions. When you were caught with your guard down you made your fight where the enemy chose.

THROUGH his thoughts he could hear the noise from up ahead. The sound rolled toward him as though carried by the hollow reverberating boom of savages beating a drum of telegraphy.

The Regular Army was up there. Perhaps forty miles or more ahead. A protective distance in 1918, he thought; a matter of scant minutes today if there was a break-through.

The Army had moved up all night and all morning. The Regulars from the camps at San Antonio, Fort Clark, Fort Bliss, Camp Hulen. He'd seen them go. He hadn't slept for the last fifty-two hours. They didn't have much modernized equipment but they said what they had was the best. They'd find out if that were so. But in any case they'd put up a fight. International crises had a way of dissolving when the United States soldier got out his bayonet.

He heard the signal corps lieutenant, sitting by the earphoned telephone operator, swear in a thin scratchy voice.

"They didn't drop anything lighter than 1100 pounders on Monterey. My God. Nothing lighter. What could the heaviest have been? There's nothing left of the city. Maredo got a taste of it too. It made the mistake of calling out its militia. 1100 pounders. They say one of them makes a hole thirty yards wide and fifteen deep. A platoon of Maredo militia got caught by one. Blew it to pieces. Not a squad. A platoon. None of it left."

The lieutenant got up and looked down at the bottom of the hill, scowling on the furious activity.

"How's it going up ahead?" Scotto asked.

The lieutenant looked at him. He was in uniform and wore a helmet. He was young-faced with a mustache. He eyed Scotto with the contempt a uniform has for mufti when action is close at hand.

"I don't know," he said.

The corporal's angry voice lashed at his machine gun.

"A tickler. An air-cooled pea-shooter. Look at it. That's what they give us. Why don't they give us something that can make a hole in something? Look at it; .30 caliber! What I wouldn't give for a one-'n-a-half-inch anti-tank gun; or a .50 caliber machine gun. Just gimme one. What am I gonna do with this pea-shooter if they break through?"

The lieutenant was still standing.

"There ought to be spikes in that road," he observed. "And all around here. Tank barriers. They ought to drive spikes in the road." He cocked his head and listened, eyeing the horizon behind him. Then he went quickly to the short-wave radio.

Scotto heard his voice checking the planes that were suddenly roaring southwestward overhead.

"Yes, sir. One fighter squadron, eighteen planes. Yes, they're eighteen. I can count 'em. Curtiss P-40's? I can't see their markings, sir. Yes, sir, two more squadrons, eighteen each. Scout-bombers and heavy bombers. I think so, sir. I'm signal corps, not aviation. Yes sir; they've flown over. They're on their way up to it now by their direction. No, sir, none of theirs have shown up yet. They've all been ours on their way up, so far, sir."

Scotto watched them disappear. He wondered where they were from. He'd heard rumors that the reason they weren't sending enough planes was because they couldn't get half of them off the ground. The planes that succeeded in getting into the air came down a lot quicker than they'd gone up. Sabotage. Some of the stories about their bursting into flames had been pretty grim.

The army air bases at Jacksonville, Barksdale and Moffet had fared better but there still weren't enough. Reports had come in that the *Panzer* and *Schnell* were moving under a guard of nearly a thousand planes.

RANDOLPH and Kelly Fields hadn't been bothered by sabotage, he'd heard, because neither had much to offer in the way of active assistance. He'd heard they were mounting machine guns on all flyable crates at both fields as well as on passenger air liners. The cadets and ex-Navy pilots who were going to fly them didn't guarantee anything significant; but they guaranteed their presence.

The air assistance expected from bases at both Bruja Point in the Canal Zone and Borinquen at Puerto Rico had not arrived. It was said they had all they could do down there to handle swastika-marked Heinkels and Dorniers which had suddenly swarmed apparently out of Martinique.

The planes he had just seen he judged to be from mid-western air bases at Selfridge or Wright or St. Louis. There were promises of more from Maxwell, Langley, Mitchell and Westover fields but it would take time to get here from the Atlantic Coast.

But rumors were everywhere, wild and outlandish and devilish. He massaged the soreness out of the wound he had received in his arm at Jacob Wolf's villa. It didn't hurt so sharply now but the soreness was constantly there.

There had been one rumor which turned out to be grimly authentic. An entire army division, loaded onto a train speding from Camp Beauregard, Louisiana, had been blown up last night. The casualties had been appalling, as well as the loss of the all-important 105 mm. guns and howitzers and potent 155s—essential in stopping tanks and armored cars from safer distances than the point blank range the field gun 75s and 60 mm. anti-tankers required.

He had listened to them in Houston; rumors, reports, tales of decimating occurrences at important railroad junc-

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tions, munitions plants and air bases. The absence of supporting militia and regulars from Camp Huachuca in Arizona and Camps Merriam and Lewis in California seemed to substantiate the accounts told of the mysterious pneumonia epidemics which had overnight brought three-quarters of the camps' complements to sick beds.

In San Diego unsolved fires and explosions had been creating havoc for the last day and a half. He had listened last evening in the Houston Infantry Armory while a taut-voiced Intelligence major confirmed the newspaper report that the units from San Diego and El Paso, hoping to catch the *Panzer* and *Schnell* in the rear and flank, had been annihilated because of an unaccountable lack of artillery and plane support.

Now as he stood on the hilltop waiting with the others, helpless and inept as himself, bitterness came and he was glad only of the fact that he had seen to it that Tommy had removed Ardith from Maredo. She and the young Mexican had boarded a train three days ago and by this time should have arrived in the comparative and temporary safety of Baltimore.

AMATEUR short-wave operators had picked up a Mexican-Nazi broadcast which had been interrupted by an American voice shouting an absurd warning of invasion and appealing to listeners to relay the message to a man named Scotto Thorgensen in Maredo.

The police, after canvassing the hotel registrations, discovered Scotto and then refused to consider his fantastic words. Ignoring the doctor's protest, he removed Ardith from the hospital and placed her under the care of a nurse and Tommy on a streamliner bound eastward.

Wires and long-distance calls to his editor availing him nothing, he took a plane intending to go to Washington and see Thresher himself. "Washington refuses to act without General Thresher's approval," had been Burton's reply to his telephone calls. "And he's assured them there's no cause for alarm. You've got to take into consideration the fact that he knows more about the situation than a cartoonist. He's made extensive and successful studies of international crises, fella."

A delay over reservations had cost twelve hours and the plane had proceded no farther than Houston when its radio picked up the emergency call from Washington.

The government had become genuinely alarmed at the series of catastrophies which were occurring in the United State simultaneously with the demolition of Monterey.

Observation planes, disregarding the present international relations which prohibited American craft from flying over Mexico, had made flights into the country, those that hadn't been shot down returning with photographs of Nazi-Mexican air bases no longer camouflaged, within sixteen miles of the United States Border.

The plane had set him down in the midst of the confusion which had descended upon Houston overnight. He did not like to remember that confusion. It was like a city that had gone deliberately mad and went about doing a thing it was not prepared to do nor had any patterned idea of how to do. It was like a crowded fort which has sighted the enemy and passes out its inadequate supply of rifles to a *mêlée* of green men.

So the bitterness which came upon him here on the hill concentrated upon no tangible point but upon those or that which had put him here, with nothing in his hands, with no knowledge in his mind, with only anger in his heart.

The lieutenant was standing, pointing with his long arm.

"There," he said. His voice was hard.

Scotto followed his hand and saw the planes coming out of the southwest. He began to feel cold in his chest.

"There's been nothing over the radio for five minutes," the lieutenant said. "Nothing from up there."

Vince, the private who had taken over the automatic rifle, said, "Now we'll get it. They're the bombers. There's been a break-through up there."

"No," the lieutenant said. He was staring hard through a pair of field glasses. "There's been a break-through but those aren't bombers."

They grew larger and their noise began to drum heavily. There were more than thirty of them. Small black-white puffs began to blossom around their formed echelon as they came closer.

"My God," the lieutenant said. "Archie. We must have anti-aircraft somewhere in back of us. Who'd have thought it?"

The drumming rose to a pounding beat as the planes passed directly overhead. They were bigger than anything Scotto had imagined. He couldn't see their tails but he thought of the Mexican Eagle astride the swastika which must decorate them and an unpleasant tingle touched him.

The corporal had been digging into an oblong ammunition box. Now he came over and said, "You got to have something to throw at somebody. This is easier to handle."

He took the barrel and stock of a blunt submachine gun and fitted the stock onto the forward assembly. He put a clip into the gun and held it and more clips out to Scotto.

"Just keep your finger crooked on the trigger. It'll talk for itself." Then he showed him how to insert a fresh clip.

Scotto jammed the stock against his shoulder and with his left hand took hold of the forward grip of the gun. It gave him a severe feeling of security.

He saw the corporal laying out grenades in a neat line on a pack blanket and then he heard the high voices of the men in the trenches below him and the sound of vicious firing came almost at once.

"Behind you!" the lieutenant called.

He turned and then he saw. They were nearly to the earth. Their parachutes mushroomed whitely above them but they were coming down rapidly, showing how heavily they were loaded. Already many of them had landed and stepped out of the entangling shroud lines and were racing toward a central point. The others were falling like snow, countless numbers of them. The planes which has disgorged them were making a wide circle and heading southwestward from a northerly direction.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BLAZING HELL

EVEN FROM this distance he could see that they were equipped with rifles, machine guns, mortars and even light cannon. In their uniforms which resembled loose fitting ski suits and their heavy leather and steel helmets they appeared sinister and unworldly, as though they had been dropped by transports from Mars.

Now they were advancing, breaking into a loose long line of open formation. Their guns were beginning to clatter and thud and Scotto was sudenly conscious of sharp whines about his head and he dropped to his belly, watching them and holding the sub-gun tightly. He could make out the color of their faces and few of them were the brown-skinned faces of Mexicans.

The American officers had succeeded in restraining the men of the Force who would have leapt from their protection and charged openly at the figures who came toward them from the rear. Now they waited, their rifles thrown over the back of their barricades, shouting enraged words at the advancing line of tent-like umbrella men.

Scotto was aware of the sharply ascending drones of more planes and realized that new transports were dropping their human loads all along the rear of the line, as far as it stretched.

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Then the corporal was swearing and his machine gun began to rattle and Scotto worked his own gun, sweeping it at the oncoming line and watching the figures pitch forward and out of the corner of his eye seeing his empty shells jerking in an arc from his gun to the ground.

Below him the Force fired its rifles and jerked the bolts and fired again and again.

The advancing line seemed to dissolve, form, dissolve again, form and come on. Now some of them halted, knelt about the mortars and light cannon and explosions began to thud in the trenches and Scotto was aware of screams and limp men and gaps in the trenches which smoked briefly and were empty and then were filled again by dungareed, shirt-sleeved, hatless members of the Force.

The ground beneath him winced and shook his belly and there was a heavy, hurting noise and concussion hammering his ears and he heard the corporal and lieutenant swearing, using almost the same words at the same time.

A mortar shell had burst on the other side of the crest and he saw that two of the machine gun squad were lying quietly crumpled with their faces turned sideways.

Then he was using his gun again, listening to the clatter and picking as targets men who were kneeling about a mortar not seventy yards away. He saw them slump as though a wind had knocked them over.

Above him, the sound had taken on a new voice. Once, as he injected a fresh clip into the gun, he glanced briefly upward. The sky seemed to be darkened by diving, climbing, sweeping plumb-bobs, and it was the voice of their fighting, the whine and sing of it, adding its tone to the din about him, which brought home the conclusion that no matter what sort of a piteous show the Force put on down here, it wouldn't make any difference.

Save for one type of plane, he couldn't distinguish between American and enemy fighters. The exception was the dreaded, clipped-wing Messerschmitt, which seemed to outnumber all others by ten to one.

He heard the scratchy voice of the lieutenant shout:

"Junkers! Now we'll get it from the dive bombers. Where are those fifty thousand planes we're supposed to have? Where are just five hundred of 'em? My God, the Junkers are loose!"

SCOTTO didn't look up. He saw an enemy aviator swinging down under his parachute, saw him hit the ground close behind the barricade, disentagle himself and start running. He saw a mob of the Force leap after him, saw him sprinting like mad as he hunted for those of the Force who were uniformed and to whom he could surrender. But the men in dungarees and mufti caught him, surrounded him, closing in with their rifles clubbed, and the rifles rose and fell.

Then the advancing parachutists turned machine guns on them and they sprawled quickly, the earth where they had been looking as though it had been strewn with still, formless sacks.

Scotto pulled his eyes away and immediately saw a parachutist lumbering up the side of the hill, grinning as he came close, his arm drawn back, a potato-masher grenade in his hand. Drawing in his breath he turned his gun on the man, felt the steady kick of the stock against his shoulder and saw him stumble backward, turn around and fall on his face. A moment later the grenade exploded beneath his body, lifting him briefly and causing an ugliness that brought bile into Scotto's throat.

Then the air seemed to be split apart by a whistle and the ground under him pitched first, buckled, and then shook violently. Particles of earth stung the side of his face and dropped on his back, and the body of Vince, who had been operating the automatic rifle fifteen feet from him, lay across the middle of his back.

Other bombs were dropping along the trenches below; he could hear the roaring of their geysers. And then the earth of the small hill lurched beneath him again, winced beneath him, and he felt Vince's body lifted from his back as though a great hand had grasped it and flung it from him.

There was a sour taste in his mouth and he thought it must be the taste of the fear that was coming up from his stomach. He wanted to shout and then cry.

He thought if the pilots in the screaming, diving Junkers above could hear him cry they would go away. He lifted his head and saw that the parachutists were waiting, a hundred yards away, for the bombers to complete their destruction, and he tried to bring his gun to bear on a group of them. The whistle and the falling dirt came again, but this time the earth beneath him had not moved.

He had no idea how long it lasted There would be intervals in which he was conscious of the explosions that were far off, and then he would look to see what was left of the trenches, and see men running aimlessly, mad from wounds and the lack of a tangible foe, and once he had the thought that there was nothing fine about death, alone and unidentified on a crowded field.

THEN WHEN it ceased, for some strange reason he looked at his wrist watch and saw that it had lasted less than half an hour and it was twenty minutes after two. He thought, How few people know the exact minute when they will die; here it is twenty minutes after two in the afternoon and by two-thirty I will be dead.

Because he and the lieutenant, the only ones alive atop the small hill, had seen the tanks coming, and the armored cars, and the motorcyclists who rode between them and the automatic-riflemen who walked behind them.

They were still a mile away, but they were coming, moving rapidly.

As he first glimpsed the mechanized unit it was still compact and tight from pouring through the hole it had made up there in effecting the break-through in the American lines; but even as he watched it began to spread out in that great fanwise movement that is the dreaded function of the *Panzer*.

He looked down at the series of linked craters which had been trenches twenty minutes ago. Men were stumbling out of the craters and standing stock-still and gazing at the machines scuttling and lumbering toward them.

Then, as though impelled by a giant hand which touched them all, the men turned and began running headlong toward the remnants of the parachutists who knelt in preparation to serve their guns.

Instinctively Scotto and the lieutenant moved with them. Their legs worked sluggishly. Their minds told them it was wrong to run. Americans did not run. The men at Concord hadn't run.

But they ran; and it was not entirely because of a livid fear of being crushed under wheels and caterpillar treads; or because they were pitifully equipped to withstand this new assault; or because they thought they would have a greater chance against the parachutists than against that advancing tide of steel; or even because they realized they had done their best and failed.

It was simply, Scotto thought, that there was nothing else to do . . .

CHAPTER XXXVII

ENTRANCE INTO INFERNO

RAND MANSFIELD lay at the base of one of the trees in the *ahuehuete* grove. He was very thirsty and the wounds in his side and left wrist had stiffened. The gash

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along his temple felt tight. He turned over on his back, held his left wrist with his right hand and looked at his watch. It was two o'clock.

He said to Johann Kleinmichel, who sat beside him:

"It's been seven hours. We've waited here seven hours without doing anything."

"Remember, for four of those hours you were unconscious. How does your head feel?"

Rand put his right hand to the left side of his temple. He felt the congealed blood that traced a long thin line over his ear. The blinding headache had diminished somewhat but the pain was still alive.

"It's all right. I'm going in there. We can't wait any longer. My God, they've had time to blow Houston off the face of the earth." He made a move to rise.

Johann placed his big hand on Rand's shoulder, holding him. "In your condition you won't be of much use. You'd rather try and stop this thing for good than make an abortive attempt too early, wouldn't you? Elsa will be here. She should be here at any moment."

"What good will that do?"

"Don't think. Rest your head. You'll need it."

Rand lay back. When they weren't speaking he could still hear in his ears that weird high-pitched jibbering, almost like laughter, of the insane woman.

She was somewhere in the grove at present, sitting on the ground, cradling Felix Habig's head in her arms and caressing the dead man with her jibbering words, her laughter.

It was not pleasant to think of. Yet he owed his life to the Countess. At that naked moment when Habig had held the gun on him, at the very second his finger must have contracted against the trigger, the Countess had stepped from the trees behind him, her fingers interlocking themselves about Habig's throat with a strength that Rand remembered.

She had said merely the words, "You must not harm the man whom your *Fraülein* loves, my Felix," and pulled him a little, turning him half toward her with the strength in those small hands.

Rand's groping hand had found his gun before Habig had broken from her grip and started firing. Rand's first shot must have killed him, he thought, but Habig fired three times before he fell on his face. The sharp pains in his side and wrist seemed to flare and then immediately die, but the last shot caught Rand alongside the temple and he stood for a moment listening stupidly to the Countess as she caught Habig's head in her arms, moaning, "*Meine Liebe, meine hässliche Liebe,*" over and over, and laughing, and then looking very seriously up at Rand and saying, "You see, he no longer asks for your *Fraülain;* he is not now interested in your Elsa."

Then, as though the impact of the wound had taken that length of time to reach his mind, he had felt himself falling forward and after that he knew nothing.

JOHANN KLEINMICHEL, dispatched from the broadcast room to see what had become of the two Gestapo men, had discovered him and moved him away from the Countess. After making a report that Herr Habig was occupying them with work in the villa, Johann returned to tend Rand's wounds and sit patiently through the hours until consciousness came back.

Over and over Johann explained: "There's nothing two of us can do. They've more than half a dozen men in there. They'd shoot us before we got through the passage or entered the door from the grove."

He cooled Rand down by repeating that Elsa would be along at any moment. She had gone into Mexico City. She thought if President Del Rio could be informed of the situation here he would do something about it. She had been obliged to drive because Toledarez had flown Habig's plane north to take command of the *Panzer* at Monterey.

"You have to be patient. And still. You've lost a spot of blood, you know."

Yes, he must be patient. But he spoke aloud the thought that tortured him.

"But every minute we lie here the *Panzer* moves nearer Houston—if it isn't there already."

"How do you hope to halt it? Killing Thresher won't check the *Panzer*. And he's not the kind to be intimidated."

The thing which had been adding up in Rand's head since he and Stew Marchant had first arrived at the hacienda had at last arranged itself in a solution he could only hope was correct.

"Once I get in there," he said, "I'll find the answer. But I've got to get in now—" He stopped.

The shape of a woman was bending over him.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly. "Are you hurt badly?"

IT WAS Elsa Erlach. He saw the tiny lines of concern at the corners of her mouth. The small freckles on her nose stood out against the pallor of her skin.

He nodded. "I've got to get in that room."

She raised her head. Instantly the small spaces among the trees around him were filled with brown-faced soldiers, bayonetted rifles in their hands. There was one uniformed man who was unarmed. Looking at his exceedingly thin dark face Rand recognized President Del Rio.

"There were no available planes capable of carrying fifty of my Guard, *señor,*" Del Rio said quietly. "We came in machines; that is why the delay which I regret. Señorita Erlach has informed me of how it is here. At the palace I have been deluged with messages from your government which I was at a loss to answer. My denials of intended belligerance were ridiculous in the face of what is going on. I had no knowledge, no belief, *señor,* that Toledarez would dare cross the border after crushing the insurrection in Monterey. Believe me when I say my resources, such as are left me, are at your disposal."

Rand looked at the resolute thin jut of the face, the fiery eyes, remembering how this man had dispersed the Nazi parade that night in the Zocalo; remembering the words of Miguel Diego, Tommy's brother: "Del Rio does not knowingly betray his people to the Nazis. It is just that in his love for his country lies his blindness."

The simple, honest, misguided faith of the man was in the stricken apology of his eyes, in his unaffected willingness to render his aid now that it must be apparent even to him that it was too late.

Rand said, "Help me up." And when Johann and Elsa had assisted him to his feet he told them briefly what he wanted done.

The soldiers were to go around to the door that opened into the grove. They were to wait there until they heard a shot inside the broadcast room. Then they were to try to force the door.

"You go to the villa and stay there," he said to Elsa.

She stood in front of him, placing her hand in his right one and lifting her face. "I'll stay with you," she said.

He did not argue. "You will go with Johann and me, *Señor Presidente,*" he said to Del Rio.

They made their way to the entrance of the passageway. The red light would warn those in the room that someone was coming, but Johann's appearance would cause no alarm. Rand would follow quickly behind.

Waiting to make certain the soldiers had encircled the building and taken their station outside the opposite door, he looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes after two.

Then he nodded to Johann and followed him down the steps and into the passage, Del Rio and Elsa walking close behind him in the darkness.

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CHAPTER XXXIX

ULTIMATUM TO A FATHER

HE DID not let his thoughts precede him. He did not think further ahead than the next two minutes Once he thought of the woman behind him and how like strangers they were for all their moments of intimacy. Once he thought of the ache in his head and side and wrist and listened to his own loud breathing which the wounds caused.

Then Johann was pressing his face against the glass aperture in the door to be identified. And the door was opening.

He waited one brief moment to permit Johann to move fully into the room and then took the Mauser from his belt, slipped off the safety catch and stepped quickly inside.

A hasty glance showed him the startled expressions of the uniformed Gestapo men as they rose to their feet, hands reaching for their revolvers. He saw General Thresher speaking at the microphone, the black-bound book in his hand, frown at him and instantly wave to Franz at the console board.

And then he leveled his Mauser at the nearest uniform and fired.

Instantly a furore broke loose outside the opposite door and there were a great many shots and the brittle *whack-whack* of rifle butts pounding against the heavy wood of the door.

The Gestapo men half turned, their irresolute glances searching the door, their revolvers half pointing to it.

Rand fired at one of them and he fell sideways, and the others turned and leveled their guns and he knew he could not handle them and that he had been a fool to shoot the second time.

Then General Thresher's voice, laconically calm, said, "Put up your revolvers and open the door. Don't keep the gentlemen outside waiting."

Johann came through the door in the glass partition, preceded by Franz, in whose back he was shoving his Mauser.

"Don't want him meddling with those gadgets," Johann explained.

The Gestapo men, hesitant as they looked from the door to Thresher, stared in surprise at the sound of Johann's English enunciation. General Thresher regarded him with no expression. Then he said, "Hurry up. The door. Tell them to stop that noise."

Rand looked at Stew Marchant. He sat in a straight-backed chair. His feet were free but his hands were still bound behind him. And the brown cloth still gagged his mouth. His eyes were on Rand and they appeared to sparkle.

When the door was opened the soldiers poured in, bayonets at the alert, until Rand held up his hand. Ten or twelve of them had entered, rifles covering the Gestapo men who let their revolvers slip from their hands to the carpeted floor.

Behind him Rand heard the sharp release of pent-up breath and an ejaculation in Spanish. Without turning he knew President Del Rio was getting his first glimpse of General Sam Thresher, who upon many an occasion had visited Mexico City officially as a good-will emissary from the United States.

Thresher was smiling at Rand. His face held no resentment, no expression of reproach.

"A little late, Mansfield," he said amiably. "A trifle tardy, my boy."

He was quite calm.

"No," Rand said. He couldn't think of anything else to say. For some reason he glanced at the clock on the wall. It was twenty-three minutes after two. He had a sinking sensation in his stomach.

"WE ARE virtually at Houston," Thresher said. He shrugged his shoulders. He blew through his nose in the old way which made his blunt mustache bristle. "We encountered a sample of your invincible American army with its vaunted tanks and guns and planes. Unfortunately it was merely a sample. We had effectively prevented a concentration of troops at any given point." He smiled. His enjoyment of Rand's reaction to the news was apparent. "We are at this minute rolling rather devastatingly over a body of men whom the United States terms its Initial Protective Force; the National Guard, I believe. Toledarez reports their resistance heroic."

He closed his book and put it into his pocket.

"You will be interested to know," he said, "that the combined resistance of your army and your heroic Protective Force impeded our advance for exactly fifty-five minutes."

His glance caught and held Del Rio.

"*Señor Presidente,* all this"—his gesture embraced the soldiers—"is quite useless. There are certain things, including inevitable changes in the way of life, which individual men cannot check. Toledarez has perceived that fact and you have not. A juggernaut of New Order is rolling across the world. There are very many of us with the vision to prefer a position atop the juggernaut, not beneath it when it rolls over this continent.

"You think you have been betrayed. I assure you such is not the case. The New Order will prove beneficial to all it encompasses. If in gaining its ends it becomes sullied with blood, that is because of the barriers of vicious ignorance it must transcend.

"You will live to thank me for what I have done. You do not believe it now and I cannot in all truth blame you; but you and your country and your people will eventually come to understand that nothing but National Socialism can ever deliver the American people from their self-inflicted oppression and re-establish the foundation of their national greatness."

Del Rio's soft voice said, "Vile, filthy traitor."

Thresher ignored him, glancing briefly at Elsa Erlach and Johann Kleinmichel. His eyes were icy. "The Reich has a long memory. We repay treachery quickly."

THEN Rand Mansfield let the consummation of his plan reach his brain as he let the hand holding the Mauser come up until the barrel leveled at Thresher's forehead.

He watched Thresher but he spoke to Johann.

"Go into the control room. When I give the signal see that the microphone and full power are on."

He heard the door in the glass partition behind him open and close. Then he said quietly to Thresher:

"You are to give the order halting the advance of the invading forces at once. They will obey you, as your orders are the orders of the Fuehrer. Johann Kleinmichel is in a position to detect any attempted ruse on your part. I do not have to inform you of the consequences if you refuse."

Thresher smiled with his lips. Otherwise his expression did not change. "I expected something of this sort. Are you no better judge of men than that?"

"I have told you what you must do."

Thresher laughed aloud. "In order to live? Undo my work, my beliefs, my hopes, the future of this country—in order to live? Do you think I am that selfish, Mansfield? If you kill me I will have accomplished much. My work will go on. Another will be found to take my place. But what will you have gained except my death? My death will not halt the advance up there. That advance insures a salvation for the United States. I would not jeopardize that salvation merely to live. You and I both know that."

"Yes, we both know it," Rand said. "That is why I know it would do no good to shoot you."

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He turned and crossed the floor and put his Mauser in his belt and fumbled at the back of Stew Marchant's head, releasing the cloth and taking the gag from his mouth.

Marchant swallowed, trying to work saliva into his mouth. He could not speak. He looked up at Rand, his lips grinning a little.

Rand took the Mauser from his belt and said to Thresher:

"That is why I am going to shoot my friend . . . your son."

THRESHER'S expression remained unaltered and he still smiled, but Rand saw his eyes narrow, as a cat's pupils contract before strong light.

"My decision was reached through a simple process of deduction," Rand said. He hoped the hollowness in his chest didn't make itself apparent in his voice. "When Stew and I first were brought into this room you looked at him. It was different from the way you looked at me. For a moment it was almost gentle. It started me thinking.

"I thought of the man, a war hero, who would turn against the country he fought for. I thought of the father who provided such a gruesome example for his son—stuffing a garbage can full of live rats—because he wanted to impress on his son's mind the fact that he must be the strongest in order to escape the degradation which had come to his father.

"So that was why the father renounced his country, I thought; because in working against it lay an opportunity to provide for the son he must have loved very much. And he made the son change his name in the event that anything happened to the father—his name would not be linked to the son's.

"And when the father finally put his case to the grown son and found the son detested his work and would not accept it, he removed what constituted a menace simply by sending him from the country. When the son attempted to return, he had him barred, and facilitated his transference to Mexico where the father could have a protective as well as watchful eye upon him."

Rand watched Thresher, who stared at him, his lips thin under his mustache.

"You knew Stew worked against you here in Mexico; yet you did not kill him as you would another. Not even when you knew if he discovered proof of your identity as the Leader he would reveal it to Washington. You did not kill him when he came here with me, although you ordered my execution. You see how it is? You understand how I know of your feelings when no one else has known? Not even your son?"

For the first time he looked down at Marchant. Marchant's eyes were fixed upon his father. His eyes were wide with a sort of unbelieving wonderment.

Thresher smiled again, seeming to exert a hold upon himself with very little effort. His breathing came regularly.

"You are making much of nothing," he said. "This advance is nothing. Had there been no resistance there would have been no bloodshed. We cannot hope to defeat the United States with two divisions You see how you exaggerate the incident? It would never have occurred at all, believe me, if Americans had not assassinated Count Hochenlobe—"

"You lie," Del Rio shouted. "He killed himself because he was commanded to do so by your Fuehrer. He left a letter of confession. He also permitted two members of my cabinet to escape. It is all in the telegrams on my desk in the Palace—" He ceased speaking, a flushed anger in his face.

Thresher appeared to consider this. Then he looked at Rand, once again smiling.

"We are reclaiming Mexico's rightful possessions Will the *Señor Presidente* deny that? I think not. We mean to occupy Houston and arbitrate peaceably for the return of Mexico's territories—"

"You're no longer fooling anybody," Rand said. "Germany's ready to fight to the last Mexican to occupy the United States' attention here and so cut off her aid to England. And you want the fields in the southwest so that you won't have to go around the Horn as you have to at present to get your oil from Mexico. No, you've ceased to fool anybody. And that is why I have to do this."

HE TURNED slowly and looked down at Stew Marchant, his Mauser pointing, his right hand surprising himself with its steadiness.

Marchant returned his gaze. There was nothing in his eyes. They were a trifle wide. He looked as though he weren't certain what was happening. Then he dropped his eyes and fixed them on the barrel of the Mauser.

"I'm sorry, Stew," Rand said quietly. His voice, even to himself, sounded unutterably weary.

Sweat appeared upon Marchant's forehead. For a moment Rand saw him tense his legs and thought he would leap to his feet. Then the leg muscles relaxed and Marchant took a deep breath and looked up at him, trying to grin.

"It's the only way," Marchant said softly. "No hard feelings. But do it quickly."

If it were the other way round, Rand thought, he would do the same. There were some things that went on, gathering velocity and size, until they became bigger than the men they involved and more important than what happened to those men.

He heard no deterring sound from Thresher.

The gun pointed at Marchant's chest, less than an inch beneath the breastbone. He moved the muzzle slightly to one side and fired.

Marchant winced and pressed against the back of the chair. His chin went up, tilting his head. For a moment he was tense and then he shook a little. A small dark stain appeared on his brown tunic under his left shoulder, spreading slowly.

Thresher's voice came softly.

"No," he said. "No. Don't do it."

Marchant's eyes opened. His voice was a whisper and he looked at Rand.

"Don't play," he whispered. "Don't play. Make it quick." But his eyes seemed to say that he understood what Rand was doing.

Rand took a step closer and leveled the Mauser.

There was the sound of a brief scuffle and he turned his head. Three of the soldiers were pressing their bayonets against Thresher's chest. His eyes no longer appeared blue. They were dark and wide open and he was watching the stain on Marchant's chest.

"Quick," Marchant whispered. "Nice and quick."

RAND POINTED the Mauser and fired quickly and as the bullet tore with no sound into the padded covering of the wall above Marchant's head he heard Thresher's voice, thin and high and broken.

"Don't do it. Don't do it. I'll do as you ask. You understand me? Don't kill him! Tell Kleinmichel to turn on the microphone."

Rand nodded to Johann through the glass partition and turned and watched Thresher go to the microphone and heard his voice vaguely as though it were borne towards him from some great distance over a high wind.

"The Leader speaking. General Toledarez, Commander, First *Panzer* Division: Stand by."

He looked at Johann at the console who could hear

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Toledarez' reply from the speaker in the control room. Johann nodded briefly for him to go ahead.

"Cancel previous orders. Is that understood? Previous orders are canceled with this message. The order now is to cease operations and return to your base at Monterey. *Heil Hitler!* Repeat."

He signaled for Kleinmichel to open the door in the glass partition. Johann did so. Then Toledarez' voice could be heard, metalically acknowledging the order. The surprise in his voice was audible over the clanking noise of a moving tank, over the sound of heavy and light firing, over the hum of airplane motors and over the sound of what might have been men's voices shouting and cursing and screaming.

Rand glanced at the clock on the wall. It was two-thirty-three. He nodded to Kleinmichel who cut the microphone.

Stew Marchant slipped forward and fell heavily to the floor, his arms flinging out, his face turning to one side.

Rand did not kneel beside him, knowing that he himself would be unable to rise once he was off his feet. He stared at Marchant, at the pallor of his face. He was breathing regularly, a little noisily, and he had lost a good deal of blood. But if the bleeding could be stopped and the bullet removed he would be all right. He would have to be. You couldn't murder your friend, no matter what hinged on what. And Rand had made as certain as possible that the bullet did not enter close to the lung or the heart.

But he looked as if he were dying, and Thresher, pushing forward and kneeling beside him, must have thought his son's life was leaking into the brown of his tunic, for his face as he looked up at Rand became congested and red and then drained absolutely white.

He was on his feet in one movement and had snatched the Mauser which dangled from Rand's limp hand. He had hold of it by the barrel and he reversed it and turned it on Rand.

There were three explosions and Rand saw his great chest contract and seem to cave in on itself as he took a step backward and stared down at his son. The three soldiers had poured their bullets into him simultaneously and he had taken all three in the chest. His face winced a little from the hurt inside him and then relaxed and he was dead before he slipped to the floor beside the outflung hand of Stew Marchant.

Rand was aware of voices and of people moving about him. Then his eyes found a chair and he drew a deep breath and gauged the distance, taking three steps and sitting down on it and wondering why he hadn't done this sooner.

Elsa Erlach stood over him, one hand smoothing the hair at the back of his head, the other gesticulating to someone the while her voice said something about getting him to a car outside.

It came to him almost crazily that he was wishing they wouldn't take him to the car because then the movements of her hand at the back of his head would cease.

He wondered if anybody had ever felt as tired as he did . . .

CHAPTER XL

WILL THE DAY EVER COME?

THE LIEUTENANT'S ARM slipped from Scotto Thorgensen's shoulder and he said, his scratchy voice gasping, "You run . . . while you have the chance."

He'd taken two machine-gun bullets in his left thigh when they'd rushed the last group of parachutists blocking their line of retreat. He couldn't walk any farther, even supported by Scotto.

"Here. I'll carry you." Scotto let the submachine gun fall. There was no use for it now in any case.

"No. While you . . . have the chance. Get out."

"Keep quiet."

Scotto hoisted him over his shoulder and moved unsteadily. Ahead of him he could see the last of the others, the long broken lines of them, running, escaping as fast as they could from the lumbering things that were rapidly closing up the distance behind. It was an ugly sight.

The lieutenant, facing the opposite direction, his head bobbing with each movement of Scotto's stride, said in a low, pain-hushed voice, "They've stopped. They're not closing in." Suddenly it occurred to him what he was saying and he shouted as loud as he could. "Do you hear me? They've stopped. They've quit. They're not closing in!"

Scotto turned laboriously and saw that it was true. For some reason all movement back there had ceased. Nor was there the sound of the guns firing. Overhead planes still circled, but geysers no longer spouted everywhere the eye could see.

Ahead, the retreating figures had not noticed, or if they had, the inertia of their flight was still upon them so strongly that they did not interrupt their pace.

He felt no sense of elation. He couldn't figure it out.

As gently as his weariness would permit, he laid the lieutenant down. Then he lay down beside him. The watch on his wrist showed two-thirty-five and it was in his thoughts that by this time he had expected to be dead.

The days and nights of sleeplessness reached out to take hold of him, and unbelievable as it seemed, he fell instantly asleep.

The lieutenant, lifting his head and gasping heavily, was in too much pain to sleep. He watched for the first sign of movement behind; he didn't know if this were just a pause or if they really weren't coming any farther.

He couldn't think of any reason why they shouldn't.

THE SOFT BOUNCING of the big passenger airliner as it slapped against small air pockets did not disturb Rand Mansfield as any irregular motion of that sort would have disturbed him during the last two weeks in the hospital in Mexico City. The rest, the routine, the quiet of the hospital had healed his nerves as well as the wounds of his body.

Although the plane was crowded he felt alone and miserable. He sat at the window seat in the first compartment. He had been flying for three hours and had not bothered to pay perfunctory attention to the small, crotchety, elderly man alongside him.

The man was of the type that crowded the plane to capacity: Americans hastening out of Mexico now that air service had been temporarily re-established between the two countries. He whimpered and growled and recalled ghastly incidents and precarious escapes that had been his and his family's life for the last month and a half.

But he quieted eventually when he found Rand was not listening and could not be persuaded to sympathize.

Below, the lofty ranges of the Saddle Back on the right and the Sierra Anáhuac on the left swept by, looking like toy mountains in a Christmas garden.

The stewardess, young-faced and bright-eyed under her cap, came down the aisle with a radiogram in her hand. Rand leaned forward, but she looked at him, smiling and shaking her head, and passed by to give the message to someone in another compartment.

He sat back and looked out of the window. He hadn't really expected a message from Elsa this late. He had waited for her at the Balbuena Airport on the passenger ramp until the young American co-pilot had told him he couldn't possibly wait any longer.

She had been with him in the hospital for as many hours

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each day as her work would permit. They were attempting to re-open the British Embassy, just as they were the American Embassy, and she was needed. The days that she couldn't come she sent messages by Eleanor Marchant, who was continually at the bedside of her husband in the room next to Rand's. Stew would have to remain as a convalescent a few weeks more, but the doctors' reports said he was out of serious danger.

He understood how her work could wean her from him. He was himself on his way to Washington at the special request of the President.

There were a great many things Washington wanted to know. He had never seen the President in person and it was something to know the President wanted to speak to you and was interested in the information you had to give. It was the same way with Elsa and the British government, he thought; but knowing this didn't fill the emptiness inside him.

He planned to make a brief stop at Baltimore first to see Scotto and Ardith. He'd had a long night letter from Scotto, who'd flown to Baltimore from Houston as soon as the commercial airlines had resumed operation. Ardith had not completely recovered from the effects of the train journey across the country, but Scotto said her color and vigor were returning and she was beginning to worry over the condition of Celestial, the jumper she had entered in the Spring point-to-point at My Lady's Manor. And that sounded as if Ardith were going to be all right.

The night letter also desperately requested a solution to the problem of Tommy Diego, who was fretting to fly to Mexico City to be with Rand. His answering wire had instructed Scotto to hold Tommy until Rand reached Baltimore.

NOW THE STEWARDESS came around advising the buckling of safety belts, and the plane settled at Brownsville and American soldiers came in, grinning, and inspected passports and luggage before the plain took off for Houston.

You heard that the entire Second Corps with its wartime strength of four divisions had been moved to the Border and that its complements of tanks and guns and planes and new bomb sights, range-finding devices and automatic weapons were the most capable and modern in the world; but you'd heard that three months ago, he thought; and you also heard now that the strength of the entire mobilized army didn't reach the size comparable with even three-quarters of the tiny Dutch army which kept the Nazis out of Holland for only eight days.

And you heard that there were nearly as many bundsmen and active fifth columnists in the States as there were conscripted recruits.

And although officially demobilized, there was still an army of half a million men in Mexico; and Toledarez, technically a prisoner of the Republic, was still alive. It was said that he and his army awaited only the discovery of another leader, another demagogic General Sam Thresher, and that *der Fuehrer* never kept the faithful in a state of inactivity for very long.

Maybe, he thought, the President would have something to say along these lines when he spoke with him. Maybe they'd send American officers to staff and instruct the Mexican army, and in return receive permission to establish vital bases in Mexico.

But you'd have to go further than that to supplant the hatred of *Norteamericanos* which had for years been filtered into the breasts of Mexicans by a nation believing that "war is the highest expression of racial life."

He stopped thinking along these lines and looked down at the brown earth which for virtually a century had been the emblem of security, had been inviolate because it was American earth. And he did not let the words "Not any more" form in his mouth, although they had long since crystallized in his mind.

A man's hand tapped his shoulder and a pleasantly British voice said, "Would you mind awfully exchanging seats with me? I don't mean to be presumptious. They say one is less susceptible to airsickness forward. We're in the third compartment. Would it inconvenience you?"

The genially powerful face of Johann Kleinmichel looked down at him.

He got up.

"I'd like to," he said. "Very much."

He stood still for a moment, trying to regulate the beating in his chest. Johann had distinctly said *we*.

He heard the crotchety little man's voice saying to Johann, "—beat me about the head with their wooden guns. Before they had the real things, that was. Tore most the clothes off my wife and daughter. Right there in the street. Minnie and Alice escaped in a cab. I was in a hospital eight days. Charged me two thousand dollars. Eight days. All of 'em with their brown shirts and swastikas. Beat me because I was an American citizen. And in Cincinnati they're not going to believe a word I tell 'em—"

Johann's big voice said pleasantly, "Tell me about it, little chappie."

The beating in his chest wouldn't let up. He wondered if she were making the trip because of Washington or because she couldn't stand this emptiness any more than he could. He had an overwhelming desire to see the small dust of freckles on the bridge of her nose and find out what he would call her now in place of Elsa.

He began walking down the aisle toward the third compartment.

THE END

Mark the Date on Your Calendar

TARZAN

Returns in a Brand-New Adventure

in the AUGUST 23rd ARGOSY

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

IT IS our yearly custom publicly to mull over our summer vacation plans. Last year we said something about going out and living dangerously, but this proved impractical; we were compelled to give up the life of action because of a case of poison ivy. At any rate, we have a much more suitable plan for this summer: We are going to write the perfect adventure story.

Confronted with editorial criticism, authors are occasionally inclined to murmur: "Well, let's see you do it better." That is precisely what we propose to do. Running to some eighteen installments, our novel will be the saga of a splendid adventurer—a man loved by all women and admired by all men, and yet engagingly human withal. His extraordinary career will not only carry him from the Foreign Legion to the roaring West (with a brief stopover in big-league baseball), but by a dexterous bit of plotting we are going to arrange for him to travel backward and forward in time. Thus he will be able to take part in the great doings of the past and explore the future as well. All this will be perfectly convincing, the way we are going to work it out.

We can see the readers' letters now, shouting their applause of this magnificent story. We are eager to get to the typewriter. Typewriter? No, we'll write it in longhand . . . lying stretched out in the summer sun . . . writing very slowly and with care . . . and with our eyes closed. . . .

Our first correspondent this week is particularly pleased with a new ARGOSY artist, whose name he has correctly identified to be Maxwell. Prompted by this letter, we decided to tell you something about Mr. Maxwell, and you will find the information on page 23 of this issue.

CHARLES H. BACKER

I have been noticing that there is a lot more variety to the pictures in recent ARGOSIES, and I think this is a good thing. Not that I thought the other illustrations were bad—some of them were fine—but these new ones are different and they liven up the magazine.

I am referring to the illustrations on "Troubled Waters," "Forward into Battle" and several other shorter stories that have appeared recently. The artist's name is Maxwell, I think, and I'm pretty sure he is a newcomer to ARGOSY. His pictures are different from the ordinary magazine illustration, so let's have more of him, by all means. After all, there should be variety in the illustrations, just as there is in the stories. I liked "Troubled Waters," and I'm liking "Forward into Battle" very much. Another story that impressed me was "Hang Him High" by Norbert Davis. I read his other Jim Daniels serials and he is practically my favorite mystery story writer. He gets in plenty of action and suspense and yet his stories aren't hardboiled. I'm sick of hardboiled detective stories; give me Jim Daniels using his brains, and some of those wacky characters that Norbert Davis likes to write about.

You see I have no kicks. ARGOSY suits me, and I wish her success.

Denver, Col.

Here's a word from a military man who wants to pay tribute to one of our short-story writers.

TED STOKES

Just a short note to say that I enjoyed the story by your writer John Hawkins, in a recent issue of your magazine, ARGOSY.

Ft. Lewis, Wash.

NOW a note from a young ARGOSY veteran. He thinks the magazine is fine and hopes it will get better, which is precisely the way we feel about it.

C. A. VELCEIN

I have been reading your magazine for over twenty years; but this is the first time I ever wrote to you, to tell how much I like it. The first copy of ARGOSY I ever read was about 1918. I remember the titles of two stories in it. They were "By Bullet Persuasion" and "Secret Enemies"; I don't remember who the authors were.

You will understand that I started reading your magazine pretty young, because I am only twenty-eight years old now. In your issue of May 3rd the short story I liked best was "Don't Be a Goose" by Robert Arthur. It was the most amusing I have read in a long time. The serial "Drums of Khartoum" by E. Hoffmann Price is very interesting also. I have always liked to read history and stories with a historical background, so my favorite author has always been Sir Walter Scott.

Since your magazine has been published since 1882, it will soon be three score years old. I hope it keeps on getting better.

Charlestown, Ind.

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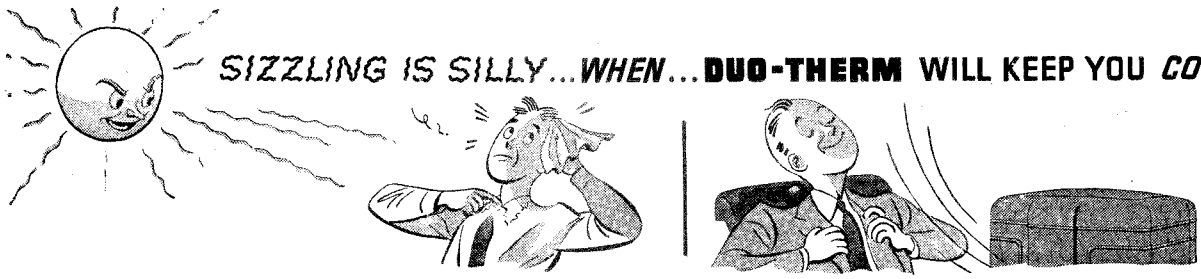

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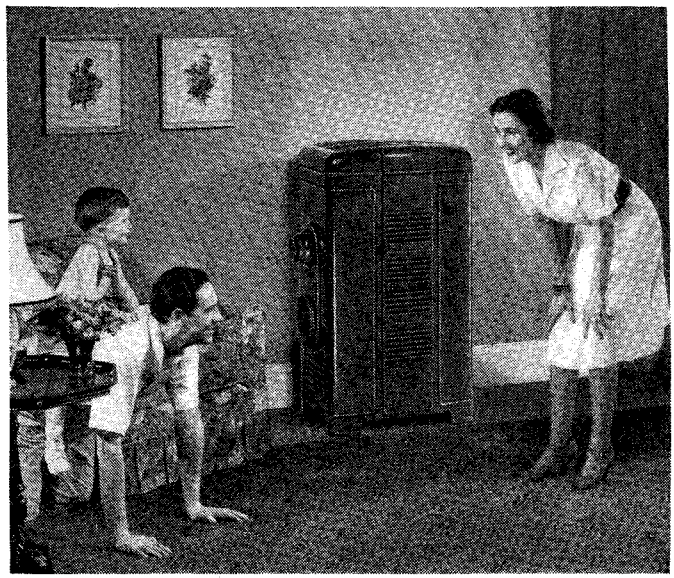

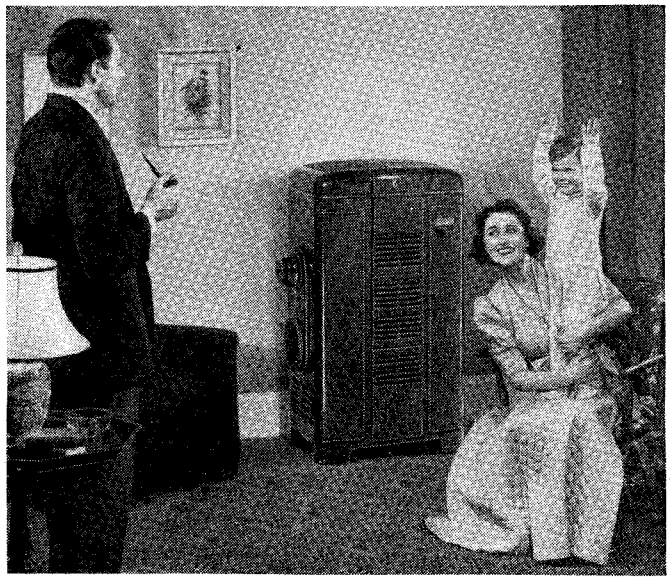

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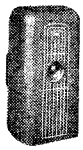

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